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T O
Protestant Dissenters,

On the SUBJECT of
CHURCH DISCIPLINE;

W I T H

A Preliminary Discourse, concerning the SPIRIT
OF CHRISTIANITY, and the Corruption
of it by false Notions of Religion.

BY JOSEPH PRIESTLEY, LL. D. F. R. S.

*Be watchful, and strengthen the things, which remain, that
are ready to die!*

JESUS.

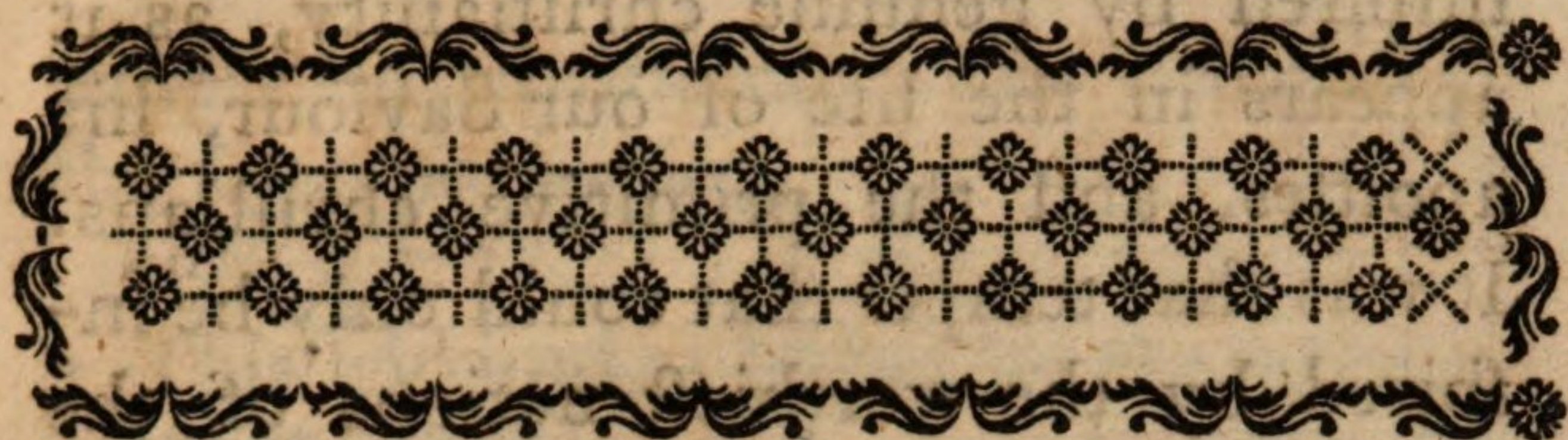
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A Preliminary Discourse concerning
the SPIRIT OF CHRISTIANITY,

And the Corruption of it by false Notions of
Religion.

EVERY set of religious sentiments must have its influence upon the mind, and will produce a particular temper and cast of thought, which will greatly influence the conduct. Christianity is by no means an exception to this general observation. Its effect upon the disposition of mind is peculiar to itself, and, except we *feel* as christians, we cannot *act* as such.

Nothing can be conceived more excellent, than the temper of mind, that was
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inspired

inspired by genuine christianity, as it appears in the life of our Saviour, his apostles, and the primitive christians. It was that temper, that could only be inspired by the worthiest notions of the divine being, as righteous, good, and merciful; attentive to the interest of all his creatures, and accessible to them. It was such a temper of mind, as naturally arose from the most favourable views of mankind, as our brethren, the offspring of the same almighty parent, the subjects of his moral government, the objects of his love, and partakers of the common salvation by Jesus Christ. At the same time, the prospect, that christianity opened to them, of a future life, gave them a just superiority of mind to this world; and thereby took off the influence of, whatever might obstruct the growth of their piety towards God, and benevolence towards man.

But false and unworthy notions of God and of his moral government, and also of the whole christian scheme, too soon crept into the church; and the spirit and temper

temper of christianity was debased in the same proportion.

This corruption began by the mixture of the *Oriental*, or, more properly, of the *Indian philosophy*, which was pretty much the same, as we now find it in the religion of Indostan. This is, probably, the most antient of all the systems of heathen mythology, that we are acquainted with, and was the source of a great part of that of the Egyptians and Greeks. It was a fundamental principle in this philosophy, that, since the world contains so great a mixture of evil, the supreme being, who is perfectly good, was not himself the maker of it; but that it was the production of another being, either independent of him, or derived from him. It was also another great principle of this philosophy, that all human souls were *lapsed beings*, of a superior order, which had existed in some former state; and it was probably an attempt to connect christianity with these hypotheses, that first suggested the idea of Jesus Christ having been a pre-existent

superangelic spirit, the creator and governor of this world; contrary to the express doctrine of the Old Testament, which gives us no idea of any other creator of the heavens and earth, besides the one only living and true God. Having got this hypothesis, they were easily led into a mistaken interpretation of some passages of the Old Testament, and supposed, that, when God is there said to have created the world by his *word* (λογος), another *agent* was meant, and not the mere *power*, or *energy* of God himself; though, the apostle John seems to have intended expressly to contradict and refute that notion, by asserting, in the introduction to his gospel, that, what is called λογος or *the word*, was *God* himself, and not a being distinct from him. When, however, by means ~~by~~ this philosophy, the supreme being was made to disappear, and to withdraw himself from the affairs of men, a considerable change could not but take place in our ideas of his attributes and character, and consequently, in the disposition of our minds with respect to him.

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The Athanasian doctrine of the trinity giving men more objects of divine homage, than one, *variety*, and, consequently, *imperfection* was necessarily introduced into their ideas of God. It was impossible for the mind of man to conceive of *three* beings, or persons, as exactly alike; and, indeed, the purpose of the scheme would not admit of it. That union, therefore, of venerable and amiable attributes, that had before been referred to *one object*, could no longer exist; and, by this means, God the Father, who, in spite of the modern notions, could not, but, be considered as supreme, became divested, in their ideas, of some of his essential, and especially of his amiable, attributes, and was no longer the proper object of imitation or love.

When the worship of dead men, saints, and angels, as well as that of Jesus Christ, was introduced, the true idea of the divine character and government was wholly lost. God was no longer considered as the proper object of our love, and immediately accessible to his creatures; and

and christians, getting, by degrees, as great a variety in the objects of their devotion, as the heathens had, (objects of very different characters and dispositions), they adopted as various, as whimsical, and as abject superstitions in their endeavours to recommend themselves to their favour. The beauty and dignity of devotion being, by this means, lost, its happy influence upon the mind vanished; and, instead of being favourable to benevolence, it became the source of hatred, rancour, and persecution. No cruelties ever equalled those, that christians have been instigated to, by thinking, that *they did God service*; nor was human pride ever so conspicuous, as it has been in the disciples of the meek and humble Jesus.

A fatal corruption of men's ideas of virtue and moral obligation was the consequence of false and corrupt notions of God; for the methods, they would think of, to recommend themselves to his favour would, of course, vary with their ideas of his character and disposition. It is no wonder,

wonder, in particular, that they had recourse to pains, penances, and whimsical austerities, when they imagined they had to do with an arbitrary and capricious deity. Hence such ideas of gloom and severity came to be annexed to a *religious life*, as could never have existed, if the divine being had been considered as one, who was, simply, *a lover of righteousness, and a hater of iniquity*. These ideas we call *monkish*, and superstitious; but they remain, where monks are no more, and where superstition is disclaimed.

I do not propose, in this place, to trace all the steps of this corruption of the spirit of christianity. That our holy religion has been greatly corrupted, is what all protestants are sensible of, and they all profess a zeal for its reformation; though some of them have been more ready to pull down, than to build up, contenting themselves with the easier task of the two.

By the labours of many courageous and excellent men, some of the grosser
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corruptions of the christian doctrine and discipline have been happily rectified, and the spirit of christianity has been improved in consequence of it ; but much still remains to be done, especially with respect to doctrines, that were introduced into the church in very early ages, doctrines, that entirely disfigure the christian scheme, and debase its spirit, that make thousands of unbelievers in christian countries, and effectually prevent the general reception of christianity among Jews, Mahometans, and Heathens. I mean, chiefly, the doctrines, that are generally distinguished by the term *Calvinistical*.

It is true, that those doctrines daily lose ground with all persons, who think for themselves, and who study the scriptures ; but much yet remains to be done to promote the general propagation of christian truth as opposed to them ; and being now, in a great measure, happily free from antichristian tyranny, there is no other field, in which we can exert ourselves more to the advantage of the christian

tian cause, than in clearing it from these things, that so greatly disfigure our religion, debase its spirit, and obstruct its progress in the world.

It is by no means from a regard to *truth* only, that I am desirous of contributing the little that may be in my power, towards rooting out the above mentioned antichristian errors. The genuine spirit of christianity, and a proper attention to the duties of it, are as much injured by these opinions, as the purity of christian faith. If there be any thing that distinguishes the christian religion from all others, it is its tendency to inspire humility, candour, benevolence, and, I may add, chearfulness; whereas, I am convinced, from reflection and observation, that the opinions abovementioned tend to inspire a gloomy, proud, uncharitable, and malignant disposition. In many instances the sweetest natural tempers, and every other favourable circumstance in a person's education and society, have not been sufficient to counteract their baneful influence. But there
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are many, who only affect to believe, or only half believe those doctrines, for one, who is thoroughly persuaded of their truth. Upon the former their practical influence is, happily, little or nothing; and there are but few in comparifon, though too many, whose hearts are much injured by those grofs misconceptions concerning God and religion.

It cannot be wondered, that the worshippers of an austere and tyrannical deity should contract a gloominefs of temper; that those, who imagine themselves to be the peculiar favourites of God, selected from all eternity from the rest of mankind, should be proud of the distinction, and, with the pharisee, say *stand by thyself, I am holier than thou*; that persons so favoured should have little cordial affection for those, who are reprobated of God, who are never to have any share in his favour, and in whose everlasting misery they must for ever rejoice. It can be no wonder, that persons, who habitually consider virtue as no reason with the divine being for his preference

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ence of one above another, should themselves be less influenced by those principles of honour and integrity, which according to the dictates of nature, are the things, that recommend men to the favour of God.

Those who pursue the sentiments above-mentioned to their just and only-consistent length, disclaim all moral obligation; maintaining, that they were the same favourites of heaven before, as after, conversion, and have the same communion with God, when they are abandoned to vitious indulgencies, as in the most devout meditation, or fervent prayer. Many persons, whose natural good sense restrains them from these extravagancies of opinion, will, however have less scruple to defraud or calumniate their neighbour, than to be deficient in those *religious exercises*, that give an air of sanctity to their character, and make them appear *righteous before men*.

The opinion, that men are entirely passive in the work of conversion and the
new

new birth, and incapable of themselves ~~of~~ so much, as to think a good thought; and that saving faith consists in an acceptance of, or a dependance upon the merits of Christ for salvation, or (since it is a *feeling* rather, than an *act*, of the mind), what they are fond of calling *throwing themselves upon Christ*, or a *resting upon Christ for salvation*, must be the source of great distress to persons of an ingenious disposition and good understanding; who cannot persuade themselves, that they have felt, what they conceive to correspond to those phrases, and who believe, that they cannot be the children of God without having felt it. In this observation, I doubt not, that I speak to the painful experience of many of my readers. Too many, also, it is to be feared, are driven to despair by these opinions; and, considering themselves as abandoned of God, plunge themselves in vice and ruin. If any persons *can* fancy themselves to have passed through this kind of undescribable new birth, as the feeling they have of it is incapable of being defined, they will be very apt to suspect

pect its reality or genuineness, and consequently, will be subject to the most distressing doubts and fears; because they will apprehend themselves to be in a most dreadful situation, out of which they have no power to rescue themselves, and that God has probably denied them repentance.

If they be of a temper of mind *never* to doubt of the genuineness of their faith, and the reality of their conversion and new birth, they will have such an idea of their rank and superiority to the rest of mankind, as must be utterly destructive of that christian humility, through the influence of which we are *to work out our salvation with fear and trembling*, and will be inspired with a more insufferable, and a more dangerous pride, than can arise from any other source.

When once men's ideas of the divine being are so much lowered, as they must be before they can suppose him to act in an arbitrary manner in the preference he gives, to his rational and accountable crea-

creatures, and to bestow his favours by rules, that are independent of their regard to virtue, they will be apt to fancy, that he may be pleased with a variety of things, indifferent to virtue, as they themselves are. They will, consequently, adopt many whimsical methods of rendering themselves acceptable to God, and be liable to run into the most foolish and abject superstition; so, that the ideas, that they annex to *serving God*, will be quite different from the practice of moral virtue. If there be any thing austere and gloomy in their own dispositions, they will be apt to fancy, that they give the fullest proof of their love to God, and, consequently, please him the most, by those actions, that give pain and mortification to themselves. Hence came the variety of penances, and the tiresome repetition of *pater nosters* and *ave marias*, as a mere bodily exercise, in the church of Rome; and it seems to be pretty evident, that going to church, and attending prayers is considered by many members of the church of England in the same light. This they look upon as in the highest,

highest, and most proper sense their *duty*, and they hardly ever attend to it as a means of cultivating good dispositions, and fitting them for proper conduct in life. The frequent long and severe exercises, by which the orthodox dissenters distinguish themselves, are of the same nature. They serve to discharge their consciences, as a *positive duty*; but have little influence to improve their dispositions and their conduct.

Upon the whole, I cannot help thinking, that there is a striking resemblance between these professors of christianity, and the Pharisees in our Saviour's time, those who *strained at a gnat and swallowed a camel, who devoured widows houses, and for a pretence, made long prayers*; and that, were our Lord again upon the earth, he would treat them with the same severity.

It may appear strange, that the influence of false notions in religion should not be confined to those who hold them; but it is true, and much to be lamented.

ed: They affect both, those, who have held them, and those, who observe them.

When the *cause* of any disorder in the human body is removed, it is not always found, that all its *effects* are immediately removed with it; and much less is this the case with the human mind. False notions in religion vitiate a man's temper and disposition, with the whole turn of his thinking and acting; and, when these have been long fixed, they are seldom or never entirely changed. The old associations will recur, and reason comes too late to break them. Thus the fear of being alone in the dark remains long after the least belief in apparitions. Those persons, therefore, whose minds have been deeply impressed, in their infancy and youth, with abject and unworthy notions of God, may never be able, habitually and practically, to regard him in that amiable light, in which he is represented in the gospel; as the object of filial reverence, love, and confidence to all his creatures. Having long considered the divine being in no other

other light, than that of a strict moral governor, they cannot soon learn to regard him as their father and their friend, attentive to the interest of all his creatures, and waiting, that he may be gracious to them. They will not easily get over all remains of the notion, that God is pleased by actions, and exercises, that give them pain and mortification. The ideas, they annex to a *religious life*, will ever convey the idea of something grave, austere, and laborious; and never that of the ease, freedom, and chearfulness, which naturally belongs to it; and the service of *God*, and of *man*, will not have that intimate connection in their minds, that they have in nature and in the scriptures.

When the mind has been deeply tainted with any false notions of God, it is hardly possible, that they should ever be practically rectified; because, the same names will continue to suggest the same ideas, and to excite the same feelings, whatever reason may dictate to the contrary. Many talk of God like Arminius or Socinus,

cinus, who, nevertheless, think of him much like Austin or Calvin. In their ideas he is a being, that they cannot freely address themselves to; and, whenever they do it, it is merely to comply with a positive enjoined duty. Tinctured as their minds are with the remains of superstition, it must be a long time before they can attain to *love God with their whole heart*, and habitually to rejoice in their relation to him, as their creator, preserver, benefactor, friend, and father.

Many persons, I doubt not, would be much more pious and devout, than they are, were it not for these remains of superstition; which, though disavowed, have a secret influence on their minds, dictating exercises and practices, which they disapprove and dislike. Endeavouring to free themselves from these bonds, they too often neglect devotion entirely, seldom praying themselves, or seriously joining in the prayers of others; till they almost lose all regard to God, and never look up to him with pleasure or confidence.

dence. This habitual indevotion would not, I believe, in many cases, have been contracted, if superstitious notions had not originally enjoined slavish and unnecessary religious exercises. Disusing these, before they could do it with the full consent of their minds, instead of resting in a just medium, they do what is not uncommon with men, who believe themselves to be guilty to a certain degree; they plunge themselves in greater guilt.

It is particularly remarkable, that long after any thing has ceased to be considered as sinful, we cannot do it without reluctance, and something of remorse; and this unjust self-accusation, and *false* remorse, is not without its effect upon the mind, as well as the true. We ought not, therefore, to discontinue any practice, that we have long thought necessary, immediately upon being convinced, that it is not so, but wait till we can do it with perfect ease, and the full consent of the soul.

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Many well disposed persons, I doubt not, find it extremely difficult to make their practice correspond to their real sentiments concerning the Lord's supper, and the Lord's day: They will do less with respect to the former, and more with respect to the latter, than, according to their judgment, they are obliged to do; and allowance ought to be made for certain degrees of this kind of inconsistency. Many persons refrain from receiving the Lord's supper, when they are persuaded, it is their duty to attend it, and are satisfied, that they are properly qualified for it; yet, though they really wish to partake of this ordinance, they never do it. These remains of prejudice are intitled to our indulgence, provided persons really strive with themselves, and endeavour to overcome them.

With respect to the Lord's day, it is evident, that the influence of a rigorous, and, what I should not scruple to call a *pharisaical*, observance of it, when it has been habitual and conscientious, does not cease with the opinion, that it ought
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to do so; and, in this case, little or no inconvenience will arise from continuing, in some measure, through life, those religious exercises, which we may have long thought necessary, and in refraining from those indifferent actions, which we may have thought to be sinful on that day. If we controul the real feelings of our minds, though they arise from false notions, and an erroneous conscience, we, in some measure, lessen the power of conscience in general, and may do an essential injury to ourselves. He is truly happy, who has attained that perfect *soundness of mind*, that he can do, with entire freedom and ease, whatever his judgment approves. To this perfect concurrence of the moral sensibilities of conscience with the judgment of the understanding the apostle seems to refer, when he saith, (Rom. xiv. 22.) *happy is he, that condemneth not himself in that thing, which he alloweth.*

We suffer in a similar manner from the remains of superstition and false notions, concerning the person and character of Christ.

Christ. Much of the peculiar power of the gospel-motives to virtue (separate from our acting with a view to obtain the reward of immortality promised in it) arises from just ideas of the nature and office of Christ; as distinct from those of the divine being himself, with which they are too much confounded upon the supposition of the proper deity of Christ, notwithstanding the different offices ascribed to each of the divine persons, or, rather, *beings*, in the Athanasian scheme.

The consideration of the *love of Christ* has something in it peculiarly endearing, when it is not considered as the same thing with the love of God towards his creatures, but as the love of one, who, notwithstanding his miraculous birth, was as much a *man*, as Adam was, or as we ourselves are; when it is considered as the love of our *elder brother*, who bore *our infirmities*, who felt all the pains and agonies, that man can feel, and, being the very same, that we are, was in all respects tempted, as we are; who loved us and freely gave himself to death for us,
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to redeem us from sin and misery ; that we might become partakers of the same love of God, and be joint heirs with him of the same glory and happiness ; that we might all alike become kings and priests unto God, even the father, for ever and ever ; who, after living many years on earth, in which he manifested the most intense affection for us, is now gone to prepare a place for us, in our heavenly father's house, that, where he is, there we may be also ; as one, who is now exercising a power, which, as the reward of his obedience unto death, he received from God, to be head over all things to his church ; and who still feels for, and will be present with his faithful disciples and followers, in all their trials, even to the end of the world.

The resurrection of Christ, also, considering him as a man like ourselves, is not only a *miracle*, and a *proof*, but also a *sample* or *pattern* of our own resurrection ; which, certainly affects the mind in a peculiar manner, and gives us stronger reason to hope, that, *because he lives,*
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we shall live also ; since, as by MAN came death, so by MAN also came the resurrection of the dead.

The esteem and love, that we bear to such a character, as we form of Christ, considered as a man like ourselves, the attachment, we have to him and his cause, and the efficacy of this principle to promote a christian temper and conduct, and to encourage us to follow this our glorious leader, the *captain of our salvation*, and the *first fruits from the dead*, *1 Cor. 15:20* (even though, like him, we be called to *lay down our lives for our friends*, and to bear persecution and torture in the cause of conscience, virtue, truth, and God) is exceeding great, and peculiar to itself, It is a kind of love and esteem, that cannot be felt by one, who is truly and practically an Athanasian ; and, in general, but imperfectly by those, who have been Athanasians ; and who, therefore, cannot easily get rid of the ideas, they have had, of Christ as God, or, at least ~~of~~ a *as* being, who has little in common with us ; who therefore could not feel, as we do, act

act upon views similar to ours, or entertain, and be the proper object of, a similar and reciprocal affection.

A man may have rejected the Athanasian hypothesis a long time before, these ideas shall even occur to him, or their power be at all apprehended. At least we can only expect to feel their influence at intervals, and must not hope to experience that amazing force, which, however, we may easily conceive, they must have had with the primitive christians, and, especially, with the apostles, and others, who personally knew Christ, and therefore never had an idea of his being any other, than a man like themselves; though, as Peter expresses himself, *a man approved of God, by miracles, and wonders, and signs, which God did by him.*

It is also to be regretted, that men can hardly ever pass from one extreme without going into another; and, certainly, a great deal of the libertinism and infidelity of the present age may justly be charged upon the real, or affected, austerity, and on the bigotry and unchristian

tian spirit of many, who call themselves the disciples of Jesus Christ; though he affected no austerity or needless singularity of any kind, and was for that reason accused of being *a glutton and a wine-bibber, a friend of publicans and sinners.* 5

It is to be regretted, however, I say, that because the professors of this *spurious christianity* affect too much austerity of character, the professors of genuine christianity should indulge themselves in too much levity; that, because the former have over rated the duties of devotion, and made them stand for all the virtues of a christian life, the latter should neglect the really useful and decent forms of it; and that because the former have much less real and vital religion than they seem to have, the latter should seem to have less than they are really possessed of.

Upon the whole, however, as far as I can judge, from giving a good deal of attention to the disposition and conduct of the different parties among the dissenters, I am clearly of opinion, that
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the character of those who may be called the more free livers among the rational dissenters is, with respect to the true spirit of christianity, superior to that of those who are, seemingly, the more devout and zealous of the other sort. Take those that have the least appearance of what is commonly called *religion* among some men, and they will often be found to have more of a principle of honour, integrity, and generosity; and to have a greater abhorrence of fraud, dissimulation, and hypocrisy, than many who who pretend to a great deal of religion; and the vices just now mentioned are those that sink deepest into the heart, and vitiate the character the most. It certainly argues a wrong disposition of mind to be ashamed of virtue and piety, but it argues a worse disposition to be ostentatious of them. The former is an excess, though a blameable excess of modesty; whereas the latter is the offspring of pride and conceit.

If we may judge from the conduct of our Saviour, we should conclude that there was something more hateful and dan-

dangerous in the principles of the Pharisees, than in those of the Sadducees. He frequently, and with great severity, inveighed against the vices of the former, but never mentioned any thing as particularly heinous in the conduct of the latter. Admitting, therefore, that the principles of the Sadducees led to *libertinism*, we may conclude that the *pride* and *hypocrisy*, which he censured in the Pharisees, were more heinous vices.

Our aptness to pass from one extreme to another, and the inconvenience attending it, are also felt with respect to our sentiments concerning the person and character of Christ. Upon finding that, instead of being *very God of very God, the creator of heaven and earth*, he is only a man like ourselves, we are apt, at first, to undervalue him, and not to consider him in that distinguished light in which, though a man, he is every where represented in the scriptures; as the great instrument in the hands of God, of reversing all the effects of the fall; as the object of all the prophecies from Moses to his own time; as the great bond of union

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to virtuous and good men (who, as *christians*, or having Christ for their master and head, make *one body*, in a peculiar sense) as introduced into the world without a human father; as having communications with God, and speaking and acting from God in such a manner as no other man ever did; and therefore having *the form of God*, and being *the son of God* in a manner peculiar to himself; as the means of spreading divine and saving knowledge to the whole world of mankind; as under God, *the head over all things to his church*; and as *the Lord of life*, having power and authority from God to raise the dead, and judge the world at the last day.

There seems to be a peculiar propriety that these powers respecting *mankind*, should be given to a *man*; and it therefore *behoved* our Redeemer to be *in all things like unto his brethren*, and to be *made perfect through sufferings*; but, certainly, the man who is invested with these powers and prerogatives should be the object of our attention, reverence, and love, in such a manner as no other man can be, or *ought* to be. I trust

I trust that the tendency to that extreme which is the reverse of the austerity of the old dissenters will not be of long continuance, but will cease with the spirit of opposition ; and he may think himself happy who can, in the least degree, be the means of accelerating this desirable event. What greater object can a man have in view, than to establish the evidences, ascertain the genuine principles, extend the knowledge, and promote the spirit of christianity, free from pharisaical rigour on one side, and a tendency to licentiousness on the other.

It is with this view, that I have made the following *address to protestant dissenters on the subject of church discipline*, intended to revive the genuine spirit and conduct of christians, as members of a religious society, and to exhort them, after having rejected what has proved to be tyrannical and mischievous in church authority, to resume what may appear to be consistent with christian liberty, to promote a christian temper, and lead to good morals.

An Essay

*An Address to Protestant Dissenters
on the subject of Church Discipline.*

My Christian Brethren;

HAVING addressed you formerly, and, I hope, not wholly without effect, on the subject of the *Lord's supper*, I now take the liberty to request your attention to another subject, that nearly concerns you, as christians, and which, I cannot help thinking, is too much neglected among us Dissenters, and especially those of us, who are generally denominated *rational* Dissenters ; I mean CHURCH DISCIPLINE, or a proper provision for promoting the knowledge of christianity, and more especially the practice of the duties

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ties of it, among the members of a christian society.

It is obvious to every person, who attends to the state of christianity in primitive times, and who reads the New Testament, and other early christian writings; that, originally, christian churches were particularly distinguished by the vigour of their discipline; and it is no less evident, that the attention they paid to their profession as christians, their knowledge of the doctrines of christianity, and their peculiar zeal in discharging the duties of it, and in adhering to their religion in difficult times, were, in a great measure, owing to this circumstance.

It is no less obvious, that there is hardly the face of any thing that can be called *discipline*, among us; and I fear, that the effects of this deficiency are no less conspicuous. Such, indeed, is the state of things at present, that I have very little hope of seeing any effectual reformation. I am sensible that the
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CHURCH DISCIPLINE. 3

bare attempt to introduce any thing of this kind, would, in many cases, be attended with peculiar difficulty. This however, shall not discourage me from endeavouring to bring the subject a little more into view. When we see the importance of the *end* to be gained by it, if we dislike one *means*, we may, at least, be thinking of some other.

To give you the clearest idea of this subject, and of what I would propose with respect to it, I shall divide this discourse into several distinct sections.

SECTION

SECTION I.

*Of the state and effect of church discipline,
in primitive times.*

WE are sufficiently authorized to say, that the great end which the Almighty had in view, in the dispensation of the gospel, was the reformation of a sinful world; and that, whereas, before the coming of Christ, the Jewish nation alone, was honoured with the title of the *peculiar people of God*, the general promulgation of the gospel of Christ, was intended to procure him, from *all* nations promiscuously, a *peculiar people zealous of good works*.

Every christian society, therefore, having the same object in a particular place, that christianity in general has with respect to the world at large, should be considered as a voluntary association of persons who embrace christianity, and who are desirous of taking the most effectual methods to promote the real ends
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CHURCH DISCIPLINE. 5

of it; or, in the language of scripture, *to build themselves up in the holy faith whereof they make profession, to edify one another, and to provoke unto love and to good works.*

The members of christian societies are to exhibit to the world around them, an engaging pattern of christian virtue, faith, hope, and joy; that *others, seeing their good works, may glorify their father who is in heaven.*

In every christian church, therefore, there should be provision for admonishing all those who transgress their duty; for *reproving, rebuking, or exhorting*, wherever there may be occasion for it; for taking every favourable opportunity of suggesting useful hints, cautions, and encouragements; in order to make good impressions on the minds of all, at those seasons in which they are most likely to be deep and lasting, as in time of sickness, affliction, and distress. More especially, there should be proper provision that children and youth be particu-

larly attended to, that they be carefully instructed in the fundamental and practical principles of christianity, in order that they may be well prepared for entering upon life with advantage, and be proof against the temptations and snares to which they will be exposed in it. Lastly, the weak and wavering should be strengthened, and have their difficulties removed. By this means, the great motives to a holy life, being continually kept in remembrance, every member of the society may be *prepared for every good word and work*, be disposed to act with propriety and dignity, as becomes men and christians, upon every occasion in life, and to die with composure and good hope.

To gain these great and valuable ends, in the present state of human nature and of the world (in which every man is continually in danger of swerving from his duty, of indulging some inordinate passion, and contracting some bad habit) I need not say that some *apparatus* is necessary, for no end can be
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CHURCH DISCIPLINE. 7

gained without adequate means : and the methods that were adopted by the apostles and primitive christians were excellently calculated to to answer these purposes.

The plan of a christian church was originally the same with that of a Jewish synagogue, which (though, I believe, it was not of divine appointment) was admirably simple and proper. Synagogues were places set apart for the reading and expounding of the law, and also for prayer. Here the people in the neighbourhood assembled for these purposes, every sabbath-day. A number of the more elderly persons, and those who had the most influence in the neighbourhood, had the title of זקנים, or elders, were appointed rulers of the synagogue, and had some kind of authority over those who belonged to the place ; and some one of them was generally distinguished from the rest, but only by precedence, and having the direction of the service. The apostles and primitive christians, having been used
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to these regulations in places of public worship, adopted them in the constitution of christian churches.

When, therefore, in consequence of preaching the gospel in any place, a number of persons were converted, the apostles immediately formed them into a *regular body*, and appointed proper *officers*. Those who were distinguished for their age, gravity, good character, and knowledge, were made *presbyters*, or *elders*; or, as they are sometimes called, *bishops*, though this last title was very soon appropriated to one of them; who was not, however, superior to the other elders in rank or authority, but only (to prevent confusion) presided in the assembly, and superintended the business of preaching, baptizing, and administering the Lord's-Supper. He also gave orders with respect to some other things, in which a number could not act to advantage.

Besides elders, and bishops, *Deacons*, also, were appointed. They were persons whose business it was to assist the elders
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and the bishop, particularly in administering to the poor, and in other things that were of a civil, and not of a spiritual nature.

But it was a fundamental principle in the constitution of the primitive churches, that no regulation, or resolution, respecting the state of the whole church, could be made but by the body of the people. They also chose the bishop and the elders, as well as the deacons.

Epiphanius, who flourished A.D. 360, says, that nothing was necessary to the regular constitution of a church but elders and deacons ; and that in churches where none of the elders were thought worthy of any distinguished rank, there was no bishop.

It was the business of the elders, and by no means of the bishop only (who, in this respect, was only considered as one of them) to watch over the society, for the moral and religious purposes above-mentioned. This is very evident from the
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the book of Acts, and the apostolical epistles.

St. Paul, when, on his voyage to Jerusalem, he called for the elders of Ephesus, addressed himself to them all alike, without distinguishing any particular person as bishop, or minister; and, giving them all that name promiscuously, exhorted them to *take heed to themselves*, and *to all the flock over which the Holy Ghost had made them overseers* (or bishops, *ἐπισκοπούς*) *to feed the church of God*. St. Peter also 1 Ep. v. 4. exhorts these elders to *feed the flock of God, taking the oversight thereof, not of constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind, &c.*

The office of elder being of so much importance in the church, the apostle Paul is very particular in describing those who were proper to be appointed to it. In his epistle to Titus, i. 5. &c. he gives the following account of them. *For this cause I left thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had*

*I had appointed thee. If any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children, not accused of riot, or unruly : for a bishop (or one who oversees others) must be blameless, as the steward of God, not self-willed, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre ; but a lover of hospitality, a lover of good men, sober, just, holy, temperate ; holding fast the faithful word, as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort, and to convince gainsayers. It is evident, at first sight, that the apostle, in this passage, uses the terms *elder*, and *Bishop* promiscuously, applying them both to same persons.*

It is, no doubt, to the same order of men, that this apostle directs the following advices, 1 Tim. iii. 1. *This is a true saying ; if any man desire the office of a bishop (overseer, or elder) he desires a good thing. A bishop, then, must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach ; not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre, but patient, not a brawler,*
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ler, nor covetous; one that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity. For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God? Not a novice, lest, being lifted up with pride, he fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover he must have a good report of them that are without, lest he fall into reproach, and the snare of the devil.

We find, in an epistle of Polycarp to the church of Phillipi, that the original idea of the character, duty, and authority of a presbyter, or elder, was not altered in the middle of the second century. “ Let the presbyter, says he, be tender
“ and merciful, compassionate towards
“ all, reducing those who are in errors,
“ visiting all who are weak, not neglect-
“ ing the widow and orphan, and him
“ that is poor; but ever providing that
“ which is honest in the sight of God
“ and men; abstaining from all wrath,
“ respect of persons, and unrighteous
“ judgement; being far from covetous-
“ nefs, not hastily believing a report a-
“ gainst

“ gainst any man ; not rigid in judge-
 “ ment, knowing that we are all faulty,
 “ and obnoxious to judgement.” *King’s*
constitution of the primitive church, p. 59.

In times of persecution this order of elders was particularly useful, in discharging all the duties of the episcopal, or pastoral office, in the absence of the bishop or minister, and at his appointment. Thus Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, while in exile, writes to his elders, exhorting them “ to discharge his own
 “ and their office too ; that so nothing
 “ might be wanting, either to discipline,
 or diligence.” *ib.* p. 62.

We see the sentiments of the body of elders at Rome in the following passage of a letter, which they wrote to the elders at Carthage about the same time.
 “ And since it is incumbent upon us,
 “ who are as it were bishops, to keep the
 “ flock in the room of the pastor ; if we
 “ shall be found negligent, it will be said
 “ unto us, as it was to our careless pre-
 “ ceeding bishops in Ezek. xxxiv. 3, 4.
 “ that

“ that we looked not after that which was
“ lost, we did not correct him that wan-
“ dered, nor bound up him that was
“ lame; but we did eat their milk, and
“ were covered with their wool.” *ib.* p. 63.

In the absence both of the bishop and elders, the deacons officiated in all ministerial duties.

At the first formation of christian churches, there seems not to have been, in any respect, the least difference between their elders and their bishops, in point of qualification for the ministerial office; nor will it be wondered at, when it is considered, that they were alike converts from the common ranks of life, and that none of them could have been educated with a view to any employment of that kind. Also, as the bishops gave little or no more of their time to the society, they had little or no greater share in the church's stock, than other elders: and no bishop or elder was wholly maintained out of it, unless he had no other subsistence, and gave his whole
time

time and attention to the duties of his office, which was seldom or never the case.

It appears, however, that the nature of their situation soon made a change in this respect. It was found necessary, for the honour and credit of christian churches, that the bishop should be a man of reading and learning, well versed in the scriptures, and capable of expounding them; thoroughly acquainted with the grounds and principles of the christian religion, and able to defend them against the objections of the philosophers, and other enemies of christianity in those days. For this purpose he could not do less than give his whole time to study, and other duties of his station. Upon this the bishops began to share more largely in the revenues of the church than any of the other elders; and at length it became the custom of the western churches, to divide all their collections into four parts; of which the bishop had one, the elders and deacons, (who were also called the clergy) another,

ther, the poor a third, and the fourth was applied to the purpose of repairing their church, and other incidental expences. This division of the church's stock is said to have been the source of many disputes and corruptions in the discipline of the western church, from which the eastern church was always, in a great measure, free; the Greeks having never made any partition of this kind, but always distributed out of the common stock, according to every persons necessities, and reasonable claims. See *Simon's history of ecclesiastical revenues*.

I need not say that it was the custom, in those primitive times, to give a much greater proportion of their wealth to the common stock of their church, than is done by us at present. In the apostles times, even the rich made a surrender of all they had for this purpose; and for a long time a very great part of their wealth went the same way; but the officiating clergy were not the better for this. It was distributed *as every man had need*.

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You see, then, that in every primitive christian church, there was a number of persons appointed by the society, whose business it was to attend to the instruction and good behaviour of all the members of it; taking every opportunity of teaching those who had need of instruction; who admonished, reproved, or encouraged, as they saw occasion; and who, as the apostle advised, were *instant in season, and out of season in this useful work*. I shall now give you, in a few words, an idea of the effect of this discipline.

The great object of it was the prevention of all vice, and irregularities of every kind, and especially whatever tended to bring disgrace upon christianity, or might lead christians to relapse into heathenism; upon every instance of which they animadverted with the utmost severity. I am far from ascribing every thing that was good and exemplary in the primitive christians, to their church discipline; but unquestionably it had its share in producing many good

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effects on their dispositions and conduct; and it seems to be agreed by all writers, that, in those early times, the christians were remarkable for the virtues that are still more emphatically called *christian*, such as meekness, patience, superiority of mind to the world, and the strongest attachment to one another, and to their religion; with respect to some of which, it must be owned, they were greatly assisted by a general expectation of the speedy coming of Christ to judge the world. For several centuries their church censures had no aid from the civil power, and yet they were more dreaded than they have ever been since, with all the terror of civil penalties superadded to them.

Their rule of proceeding in these church censures, was that which is laid down by our Saviour, the propriety and reasonableness of which, is evident at first sight. *If thy brother, says he, Matt. xviii. 15, 18. shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault, between thee and him alone; and if he will hear thee,*

thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses, every word may be established. And if he shall neglect them, tell it to the church; but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be to thee as an heathen man, and a publican. He adds, Verily I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall bind on earth, shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth, shall be loosed in heaven.

From this it was generally concluded, that the censures of the church, passed in a solemn and unanimous manner, would be ratified at the tribunal of Christ, at the last day; so that a person cut off from the communion of the church here, would be excluded from heaven hereafter. And, indeed, if a man's conduct were such, as exposed him to this censure of his fellow christians, of whose kindness and affection he had had abundant experience, and when they were under no bias or prejudice in giving their judgments, it is more than pro-

bable that it would be just, and therefore would be ratified in heaven; and we may presume, that in primitive times, this was generally the case; notwithstanding it cannot but be acknowledged, that a whole church may judge uncharitably and rashly, and in this case, no doubt, their censures will not be ratified at the righteous tribunal of God.

Whatever was the cause, the effect of church censures in those times was very extraordinary, notwithstanding all that was done to those who were exposed to them, was only exclusion from their religious assemblies, for a longer or shorter space of time, according to the nature of their offence. In no case were excommunicated persons restored to church communion without public confession, and in some cases, as in repeated apostacy from christianity, they were not absolved even in the hour of death, but left to the judgment of God only.

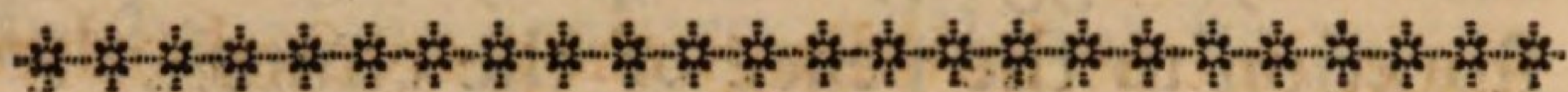
It was customary, we are informed, for persons under sentence of excommunication

nication to attend at the doors of the church (for they were not permitted to enter) with all the marks of the deepest dejection and contrition, intreating the ministers and people, with tears in their eyes, making voluntary confession, and earnestly begging their prayers, and restoration to the peace of the church.

Persons the most distinguished for their wealth or power, were indiscriminately subject to those church censures, and had no other method of being restored to the peace of the church, but the same humiliation and contrition that was expected of the meanest of the society. When Philip governor of Egypt would have entered a christian church, after the commission of some flagrant crime, the bishop forbid him till he first made confession of his sin, and passed through the order of penitents; a sentence, which, we are told, he willingly submitted to.

Even the emperor Theodosius the great was excommunicated by Ambrose bishop of Milan, for a barbarous slaughter of
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the Theſſalonians; and that great prince ſubmitted to a penance of eight months, and was not received into the church till after the moſt humble confeſſion of his offence, and giving the moſt undeniable proof of his ſincerity.



SECTION II.

A general account of the corruption and decay of the primitive church diſcipline.

HAVING, in the preceding ſection, given a view of the out-lines of the antient church diſcipline, and the general effects of it; I ſhall now endeavour to trace the corruptions of it.

The firſt great change in the conſtitution and diſcipline of the chriſtian church, was the exaltation of the preſbyters or elders, and of the deacons alſo, into the rank of ſingle biſhops, in churches; which was, in fact, an annihilation of thoſe important orders of men, and throwing

throwing the whole government of a church into the hands of one person.

The manner in which this change took place, was gradual and easy. Whenever the number of converts in any place became too great to assemble, with convenience, in one building, they erected other places of public worship; but (considering those not as *new*, and *distinct churches*, but as branches of the old one) in order to preserve the connection with the mother church, they did not ordain any new bishop, but had all the ministerial duty done, either by some of the former presbyters and deacons; or by new presbyters and deacons ordained for the purpose. In this train things went on, till, at length, the mother church, or some of the dependent churches, sending out more colonies, and to greater distances; the bishop of the mother church, being the only person in the district who bore that name, came to be a *diocesan bishop*, whose elders and deacons presided in all the separate and dependant churches, without any assistant or subordi-

subordinate ministers. Very few elders also remained in the mother church ; because none were now ordained to that office, except such as lived by the ministry ; so that the members of christian societies had no longer such particular attention paid to their conduct as before.

For some time, however, when new churches were erected, in places at a distance from any capital town, they were governed by new made bishops, presbyters, and deacons, like the original churches. Beaufobre says, (History of Manicheism, Vol. I. p. 113.) that he believes one cannot find an instance so early as the middle of the third century, of a church governed by a simple presbyter.

These country bishops (called chor-episcopi) made but a poor figure in comparison of the opulence and splendour of the city bishops ; and as the system of *diocesan episcopacy* gained ground, they were compelled to descend to the order
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of presbyters. Upon this the scheme of episcopacy, as it is now generally understood, was fully established. There were bishops in capital towns only, and all the churches within their district were governed by presbyters, or deacons, under them.

I need not say that the consequence of this change in the external government of the church, was the total loss of the antient internal discipline; when, instead of there being a number of persons in every church, *to feed the flock of God*, there was only a bishop in a capital town, whose whole attention was generally employed upon the emoluments and authority of his office, with respect to the inferior churches; which were governed by a single presbyter or deacon, dependant upon the diocesan bishop, chiefly, for his nomination, and upon his people for his revenues.

2. Another, and indeed an earlier abuse of the primitive discipline was introduced by factious persons, who employed
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church censures to animadvert upon particular *opinions*, as well as practices; in consequence of which, men of unexceptionable characters and conduct were excommunicated, if they only held opinions that had been condemned by a council or synod. The persons thus censured, often formed separate churches, and, in return, excommunicated those who had excommunicated them.

In this state of mutual hostility things often continued a long time, till the influence of an emperor, or some other foreign circumstance, determined the dispute in favour of one of them, which was from thenceforth deemed the *orthodox* side of the question, while the other was condemned as *heretical*. It is well known that the Arians and Athanasians were, in this manner, reputed *orthodox* by turns; as both had the sanction of councils and emperors in their favour; till, in consequence of mere faction, and the authority of the emperors, the party of Athanasius happened to prevail at last. But the first remarkable abuse of
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the power of excommunication, Le Clerc says, was on account of the celebration of Easter, when Victor, bishop of Rome, excommunicated all the Eastern churches that did not celebrate that festival at the same time with the Western churches. *Hist. Eccl.* p. 802.

3. The primitive church discipline was farther corrupted by the annexing of *civil penalties* to the sentence of excommunication. These were introduced when the Roman emperors became christians; for in the imperial constitutions, made after that event, we presently find various civil disqualifications added to the censures of the church; and the whole system of this mixed ecclesiastical and civil polity received a fresh sanction upon the conversion of the *Germans, Goths, Celtes*, and other Northern nations. These people had been used to an *excommunication* in their own pagan religions, and the consequences of it had always been the most dreadful civil penalties and disabilities. Among the *Gauls* the excommunicated persons were
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looked upon as wicked and scandalous wretches. All people shunned their company. They were not allowed the benefit of the courts of justice, nor were they admitted to any post of honour or profit in the community.

Of this prejudice of the people the christian priests willingly took advantage, as by this means they could overawe those who despised mere church censures; which, indeed, had become truly contemptible, by the manner in which they had been conducted. Civil penalties for offences against the church were increased by degrees, till heresy came to be considered as a crime of so heinous a nature, that burning alive was decreed to be the proper punishment for it; and this horrid excess was not confined to the church of Rome, which is *drunk with the blood of the martyrs*, but has been imitated, in more than one instance, by several sects of the reformed themselves.

4. Under the preceding article, I may be said to have enumerated the most
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horrid abuse of church discipline; but that which may more properly be called the most *scandalous* abuse of it, was the injunction of a variety of ridiculous *penances*, as walking barefoot, repeating a certain number of *Pater-nosters* and *Ave-Marias*, pilgrimages, &c. and especially the commutation of those for sums of money; whereby, at length, every sin had its fixed price; and a person might purchase a pardon, not only for all the sins he had actually committed, but for all those that he, or any fixed number of persons, might commit, in any given time to come. That no offences, or occasions of making these profits, might be neglected, and also that the priests might confirm and extend their influence over the people in a variety of ways, the practice of *auricular confession* was introduced. It was the scandal of *indulgences* that was the immediate cause of the reformation in Germany, headed by Luther and his associates.

In consequence of these abuses, religion became a mere trade, and was a fund

fund of vast wealth to the priests and the court of Rome, who spent the sums they extorted from the superstition of the people in the most abominable excesses.



SECTION III.

A more particular account of the very low state of church discipline among us, and the inconveniencies attending it.

AT the reformation, the capital abuses of church discipline were reformed, along with other corruptions; but still the propriety and vigour of the truly primitive discipline, has never yet been restored. All established churches, I believe, have annexed more or less of civil penalties to the sentence of excommunication; and all churches, established or not established, have confounded matters of opinion, i. e. mere mistakes of the head, with the corruptions of the heart and life.

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In the church of England, as in the church of Rome, neither the bishop nor the presbyter do, in the least, correspond to those orders of men in the primitive church. The bishop, instead of presiding in one society of christians, who meet in one place, is encumbered with the superintendency of a large diocese, or district, in which are many churches; and the presbyters, or priests, are those who officiate, in these subordinate churches. The deacons, also, are only *ministers*, or *clergy* of an inferior class, and nothing is left to correspond to the ancient *elders*, several of whom generally presided in every primitive church. The little that doth remain of this office, together with that of deacon, is done by the *churchwardens*.

As to the *bishops courts*, in which church censures and excommunications are passed, in which lay-chancellors and commissaries preside (officers unknown for more than four centuries in the christian church) courts in which the most vexatious civil penalties are inflicted, in which

which suits are conducted in the most expenfive and oppreffive manner, and in forms quite contrary to the fpirit of the Englifh constitution; I need not fay they bear no refemblance of, and are no proper fubftitute for, the antient church difcipline. I think it is agreed on all hands, that, inftead of being of any ufe for the reformation of manners, they are a great grievance, and a nuisance to this country.

The *Presbyterians* of the old ftamp, had elders in every particular church. In the firft church of this denomination, formed at Wandfworth near London, in 1572, eleven elders were appointed (*Neal's hiftory of the Puritans*, Vol. I. p. 202) and as far as I am informed concerning the regulations of particular churches in Scotland, it is, upon the whole, very well adapted to anfwer the purpofe of church difcipline.

Each parifh, in proportion to the extent of it, is divided into particular diftricts, and every diftrict has its own ruling

ruling elders and deacons. The ruling elders are men of principal quality and interest in the parish, and the deacons are men of good character for manners and understanding. A consistory of the minister, the elders, and deacons, is called a *kirk session*, which meets once a week, to consider the affairs of the parish. The minister is always the moderator, but without a negative. *Neal*, Vol. II. p. 260. The number of elders is indefinite, but generally twelve in each parish. *History of Religion*. Index. In some churches, I am informed, they amount to sixteen or eighteen.

In the first *Independent* church that was erected in England, there was only a pastor and deacons appointed. In some of their churches, I believe, there are one or two elders; but their deacons have powers similar to those of the elders in the primitive church; though they are not near so numerous as the elders in the primitive churches.

The terms of church communion, both among the old Presbyterians and Independants, were much too narrow; both of them insisting upon the belief of certain opinions, which many are so far from thinking to be christian, that they look upon them to be antichristian; and the Independants require also such an account of what they call *experiences* in religion, as there is not a shadow of ground for in the New Testament, and which few but enthusiasts will pretend to.

The immediate object of church discipline among the *Independents* is two-fold, viz. an almost perfect uniformity in matters of faith, and also the religion of the heart with respect to God; both of which, in the extent to which they carry them, are very improper subjects of human judicature, and which it is highly dangerous to the interests of christianity for men to intermeddle with.

The articles contained in many of the *church-covenants* that I have seen, and which every communicant is obliged to subscribe,

subscribe, are far more numerous than the *thirty-nine* of the church of England; and, beside all the absurdities and contradictions of what is commonly called the *Calvinistical system*, enjoin an unity of opinions, with respect to such things as all the established churches in the world have left indifferent; so that all the mischiefs that can attend human impositions in matters of religion, in any part of the christian world, are found among them; except, that they have not the power to persecute unto death, those who differ from them.

As to the second object of their discipline, viz. the state of the heart with respect to God, and a person's actual fitness for heaven, their conduct is not only absurd, but dangerous to the interests of real virtue. All that men can be proper judges of, is the outward propriety and regularity of behaviour. This was all that the primitive churches attended to; and whenever men pretend to decide concerning any thing but plain *facts*, of which every man can judge by

the evidence of seeing and hearing, a field is open for the utmost extravagance of fancy, which may be productive of the grossest self-delusion and imposition.

It has pleased the divine being, for good and obvious reasons, not to make the terms of salvation so very determinate, as that a man shall be able to pronounce with *absolute certainty* concerning the future state of himself or others, while we are in this life. It is evidently the best for us never to be without the influence both of *hope* and *fear*; and therefore all that we have authority to say from the scriptures, is, that when we have a fixed resolution to do our duty, as far as it is known to us, we have reason to *hope*; and that when we either have not that resolution, or when our virtuous purposes are easily over-borne by the influence of temptation, we have reason to *fear*. This is the nearest that any man can judge, even in his own case; and by this rule let every man *examine himself*, though not with a view to church-communion. All
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that others can see or judge, is, whether a man's conduct in life be such as is unworthy of their society ; i. e. in this case, contradictory to his profession as a christian, and such as would be in danger of corrupting or disgracing them.

Instead of proceeding upon these maxims, which are easy, useful, and authorized by the scriptures and the practice of the primitive church, the Independants judge by rules exceedingly obscure and doubtful ; their proceedings have a dangerous tendency with respect both to the candidates for church-communion, and those who sit as judges of their qualifications ; and their whole system of discipline has no countenance in our only rule of faith and duty, and no example for very many centuries in the christian church.

What can be more precarious than to judge of a man's fitness for christian communion by certain *internal feelings*, which are incapable of being described, except by strong metaphors ; by a kind of *faith*

that is different from believing, and a *new birth*, that is something else than a change of affections and conduct, proceeding from rational motives; a new birth, in which a man is entirely passive, and to which nothing he does, or can do, does in the least contribute. What room is not here left for self-delusion with respect to the candidate, and imposition with respect to the judges. How dangerous also, is the conceit that is encouraged in the candidate, who hereby declares his opinion of his fitness for the communion of the saints on earth and in heaven; and what must we think of the presumption and arrogance of those who make themselves judges in such a case. Such a discipline as this, which, in the most favourable view of it, chiefly respects the feelings of the heart, might be worthy of the cloystered monk, but is certainly hurtful in real life.

Men who act upon this system will be liable to be imposed upon both by the visionary and the artful, in plainer terms,
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by the *fools* and the *knaves*. The one will really believe that they have felt and experienced what is absolutely incompatible with the human faculties; and the latter, seeing that nothing else will do, will be tempted to dress up a tale in the only style that will take. It is no secret, that, in some places, those who are versed in the *peculiar style* of the party, have made a business of drawing up experiences for those who wanted them.

In saying this I mean no ridicule. The representation is true, and lamentable. I have even heard it complained of by several honest and sensible ministers of that persuasion; who, though thoroughly calvinistical in other respects, cannot but be sensible how unscriptural and mischievous this system of church-discipline is.

For my own part I am very willing to think that the most corrupt species of christianity is better than none; but I do not scruple to declare, that, in my opinion, it is better to have no church-discipline

cipline at all, than that of the Independents.

With the generality of those who are now called Presbyterians in England, the whole government of the society, with respect to morals, is in the hands of the minister. There is no regular appointment of any officers. If there be any, they are those who, by tacit consent, officiate as deacons only, and barely carry about the bread and wine in the administration of the Lord's supper. Something, however, of the idea of the ancient elder is annexed to their character, as they are generally expected to be some of the more grave and serious persons in the society.

So long has every appearance of church discipline been neglected in many of our societies, that nothing of the kind is expected of the minister, tho' he is the only person who has so much as any nominal authority in the place; and so far is it from being expected of him to visit his hearers, in order to inquire into the
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the state of their families, and to give them advice and admonition, as was the custom formerly, that I am informed there are societies among us, in which the ministers are expressly forbidden to visit their hearers, except by particular invitation. It is certain that the least hint of an admonition out of the pulpit would, in many places, give unpardonable offence ; and these maxims, I am afraid, are gaining ground among us.

In short, a dissenting minister, among those who are usually called the *rational dissenters*, begins now to be considered as a person who is paid by his hearers for haranguing them once a week ; and the people attend the place of divine worship, if not from mere unthinking habit, with the same views with which they would attend the lectures of any other person, from whom they expected instruction or entertainment. Many of them have hardly the idea of having any thing *to do themselves*, or *with one another* ; so that the performance of the minister being the only object of attention, if they dislike

like his sentiments or delivery, they make no difficulty of quitting the society, provided they can please themselves better elsewhere.

In fact, all the real business, or connection that the generality of our *hearers* (as they are now usually and properly called) have with the society, is to attend the baptism of their children, and to have the prayers of the church, on those few occasions, on which it would still be considered as *indecent* not to have them. The Lord's supper is neglected, partly through some remains of superstition hanging upon their minds with respect to it; but in part, also, I am afraid, thro' indifference to it, as a religious act, and because they find that, consistent with decency, it may be neglected. Indeed the neglect of church-communion is now so general, that those who do attend the Lord's supper, are more *marked*, and singular, than those who do not. If it were possible for a primitive christian to see the order of our churches, he would hardly think there was the appearance of our professing ourselves christians; and

and indeed those who do not believe christianity do almost every thing that we do. How then, my Brethren, do we distinguish ourselves in the face of the world, and confess Christ before men, when we are, in fact, rather ashamed of the strict and proper profession of christianity ?

In the church of England the people have *responses* to make, and I believe it would be particularly noticed if a person habitually omitted communion ; which, together with other things of a similar nature, gives the members of that church something to do ; which fixes their attention, and makes the discourse of the minister to be considered as the least essential part of the service. The people going to church, and doing what they call their *duty*, is, with them, quite a different thing from the minister doing his.

In this respect (though in little else) it must be owned, they resemble the primitive christians. With them the church or the society, was every thing, and the presiding bishop was comparatively of
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small account. They met *to edify one another* ; to read the scriptures, to pray, sing psalms, occasionally to admonish and censure particular members, and always to express their relation to one another, and to Christ their common head, by partaking of the Lord's supper. The discourse of the minister, or his mode of delivery, were with them things of trifling consequence, in comparison of these. They had no idea of leaving any christian society on that account, and the man who should have done it would not have been received in any other.

The inconveniencies attending our maxims and conduct, are great and manifest. That any single person, however well disposed, or well qualified, should conduct the whole business of church discipline, as it is described in the New Testament, and practised in the primitive church, in admonishing, reproofing, comforting, and advising all the members of a large christian society ; and, at the same time, do what is now expected of the minister or pastor, in composing sermons, preaching

preaching twice every Lord's day, and often on other days, baptizing children, administering the Lord's supper, and visiting the sick, is, at the first view, impossible. And when it is added, that this person is generally intirely dependent upon the society he so serves for his subsistence, we may certainly say, that if it were possible, it is, in the nature of things, highly improbable that he should do it, with fidelity and good effect. It is much more than can be expected from the powers or virtue of man; and it may justly be said, that every idea of the antient church discipline, and of the uses of it, must have been lost, before such an imperfect system as ours could have been adopted.

The generality of our dissenting ministers are, in a variety of respects, exceedingly unfit to discharge many important parts of the duty of the antient elders. The business of composing sermons and preaching, in a manner obliges them to adopt a *studious and retired life*; so that they are often the last persons to hear of any irregularity in the society; and when
they

they do hear of such things, admonition or reproof would, in almost every case, be too late.

Ministers, for the same reason, cannot have much personal acquaintance, except with a very few of their hearers; and therefore cannot watch favourable opportunities of advising them for their good; so that if they intermeddle at all, it must almost unavoidably be in such a manner, as is the least likely to have any good effect.

Besides, the business of advising, admonishing, and reproof, requires very different talents from those of composing and delivering sermons. Nay it requires that practical knowledge of human nature, life and the world, that but seldom falls to the share of those who excel the most as preachers. It cannot therefore be expected of them.

Lastly, They who undertake this business should be men independent of those whom they may have occasion to admonish or rebuke, and by no means in
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the situation of the generality of dissenting ministers; who will necessarily feel themselves restrained from doing their duty by the fear of giving offence, and of losing the affections and contributions of their more considerable hearers. Are not your ministers men, and men of like interests and passions with yourselves?

Upon the whole, it must be evident to every thinking person, that to contrive and execute every thing that ought to be done to promote the real interest of a christian society, no one person can be sufficient; and that the joint labour and attention of many persons, of different talents and situations, are absolutely necessary.

For want of this, there must be frequent instances, in every large society, of persons contracting bad habits without any opportunity of being admonished and warned of their danger; of some who are a disgrace to their profession, and even to human nature, and yet are never reproved, much less publickly

lickly censured ; and of persons labouring under affliction or distress, without the assistance of those consolations, which a christian friend might suggest, and which their own minds were not in a proper situation to attend to.

In our situation, many persons must entertain doubts and difficulties, which they have no opportunity of having discussed and cleared up ; difficulties, which may lead to scepticism and infidelity. And so loosely do we hang together, that any person may entirely quit our societies, without being expected to give any reason for it, and without any censure upon his conduct by those who continue in it.

SECTION

SECTION IV.

An account of the circumstances that have contributed to bring church discipline into so low a state among us.

THAT church discipline is in a very low and imperfect state among the rational dissenters, and that, in consequence of it, the original ends of a christian society are very imperfectly answered, has, I imagine, been sufficiently demonstrated in the preceding section. In this I shall endeavour to trace the causes of it, and I think it will not be difficult to do this. I wish the remedy of this evil, which I shall treat of in the next sections, were half so easy.

Those persons who bore the title of presbyters or priests, had been so long elevated above their rank of elders, and had enjoyed such considerable benefices, that it was some time before many of the reformers could think of creating officers under the same name, with inferior

ferior powers and appointments. This was probably the reason why the Independents contented themselves with a minister and deacons only.

The English Puritans, however, so early as the reign of Queen Elizabeth, proposed to change the churchwardens and overseers of the poor into elders and deacons. *Neale*, Vol. I. p. 232. They held that the elders, joined with the ministers, should be overseers of the manners and conversation of all the congregation; that they should be chosen out of the gravest and most discreet members, that they should also be of some note in the world, and able, if possible, to maintain themselves. *Ibid*, p. 449.

As far as their circumstances would permit, all the old Puritans and Presbyterians formed their churches upon this plan; but this regular form of a church, and the discipline to which it was subservient, are now almost universally grown into disuse among us.

1. I almost think that one of the first things that contributed to it, was the indefatigable zeal of the ministers in those difficult times. Giving their whole time and attention to their respective congregations, aided by a superstitious reverence and respect, that had long been paid to christian ministers, and being, many of them, men of wealth and influence in other respects, they discharged all the duties both of ministers and elders; while these latter, being not so well qualified for the work, and their office itself commanding little or no respect, were overlooked by the people; and besides not being paid for their services, the people were more careful not to give them unnecessary trouble. The elders, therefore, having little or nothing to do in the society, the formal ordination of them, by prayer and imposition of hands, grew into disuse; and the deacons, whose office could not so well be dispensed with, were nominated by the minister himself, with the tacit consent of the people.

2. It may also be supposed to have contributed to the difuse of *nominal elders*, that the people, without distinction of persons, were desirous of procuring the prayers and advice of any persons, in the society who had a character for understanding and piety. For many of these, being modest persons, chose to continue these services, and in other respects, also, to do the duty of elders, without any formal appointment. Christian zeal decreasing in peaceable times, fewer of those persons were to be found; so that, at length, most of our societies were destitute both of nominal elders, and also of any persons to do the duty of elders. At the same time religious zeal decreasing also among the people, there was very little demand for those offices for which elders were applied to by the people, and consequently the want of them was not so sensible; and the want of what they did as it were *ex officio* or without solicitation, as advising, and exhorting, &c. was not of such a nature as to occasion any great alarm.

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3. As luxury and a love of pleasure naturally prevail in times of peace, it was found more difficult to engage men of fortune to fill up the station of elders, and in places where this church power was in the hands of persons of the lowest ranks, without natural influence or authority, the whole business could not but sink into contempt.

4. So long as a kind of superstitious regard to ministers was kept up among the Dissenters, they had an authority, which, in some measure, superseded all other powers in the congregation ; but this undue reverence is now generally subsided, and, as might naturally be expected, the people are rather tending to the other extreme ; so that the whole power of church discipline being in the hands of the minister, and his authority and influence, in a manner, annihilated, our societies are left destitute of any provision for those purposes for which the antient discipline was established.

5. The discipline of a church has some-

times been lost upon a change of ministers. Many of the elder ministers were possessed of sufficient authority for any purpose of church discipline; but their successors, being young men, could not with any propriety assume the same. They would only have exposed themselves to ridicule by the attempt; and before they had got years and experience, the people, having been unaccustomed to any kind of discipline, would not bear it. Thus has ministerial authority, which was a kind of substitute for church discipline, often died with particular ministers, and has not revived under any of their successors.

6. Another circumstance that has had a considerable share in bringing church-discipline into its present low state among us, is, the greater *freedom of thinking*, that first began to take place among the ministers, and is now generally diffused through the people. For some time, however, the bulk of the people, and especially the church officers, who were generally the more serious and
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zealous of their members, continuing strongly attached to the opinions in which they had been educated, the ministers found themselves greatly incommoded by them ; the church officers often making parties in the congregation in opposition to the minister, and controlling him in his favourite measures and conduct. In this disagreeable situation the ministers purposely neglected to fill up vacancies in church offices, and were, in general, heartily glad when they became intirely extinct.

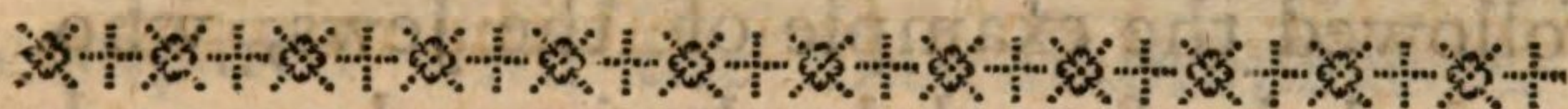
For the same reason that ministers promoted the abolition of church-offices, they discontinued, in many places, as far as was in their power, all private meetings for religious exercises, and even the catechizing of children ; in short, every thing but the more *conspicuous* duties of their office. Entertaining sentiments in religion different from those of their people, and such as their people would not have borne with, they endeavoured to keep them as much as possible out of view ; and finding themselves
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more particularly incommoded and embarrassed with the *extra* duties of their office, they laid hold of every opportunity of abolishing them.

It is greatly to be lamented, that the progress of christian knowledge should have been unfavourable to any useful provision for promoting the spirit and practice of christianity; but such have been, and such, in many places, still *are* our circumstances, that it was, and is unavoidable. I only fear lest the ministers, and the more intelligent of their people, reflecting on the obstacles that have been thrown in the way of all improvements in religious knowledge by the old system of church-discipline, and other methods adapted to promote the knowledge and practice of religion, should never be brought to bear the idea of them with patience, even though they might be applied to the best purposes.

It is too much the disposition of mankind to refuse the aid of those powers that have been employed against them,
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though they be capable of being rendered as favourable to their views, as they have ever been unfavourable to them. The folly and unreasonableness of this conduct, however, is such, that I should think that men of reason and reflection might be made sensible of it; and that, after some time, at least, they might be able to get over their aversion to any useful institution, or custom, how much soever it may have been abused.



SECTION V.

*A more particular View of the progress
and present estimation of preaching.*

AS the business of *preaching* is become almost the sole object of our assemblies, I shall give a more particular account of the original state, progress, and present estimation of it.

What we now call *preaching*, was originally nothing more than *expounding the scriptures*;

scriptures ; which not the bishop only, but any person who was qualified for it, whether elder, deacon, or ordinary layman, might do, with the permission of the bishop; and which might have been omitted altogether, and the service not have been reckoned incomplete, if it had happened that no person present had any thing to observe, on the subject of what had been read: and it is not improbable that this must have happened pretty often, as the primitive christians seem to have followed the example of the Jews, who read their sacred books in order; and some parts would hardly require, or admit of any illustration. Among the Jews it is probable, that, originally, *the scriptures only* were read in certain fixed portions; that when the Hebrew language became unintelligible to the common people, the Greek and Chaldee paraphrases, or translations, were introduced; and that no discourse was made, except a person learned in the law was present. It is probable also, that their discourses were generally short, and that there were often several speakers. It is certain, however, that

that they had no provision for constant and set discourses, every Lord's day, and that no sermons were composed for any such purpose.

That which was more especially called *preaching the gospel*, and *preaching Christ*, in the first ages, was, probably, nothing more than reciting the history of Christ, as of itself containing a satisfactory proof, that he was a teacher sent from God. If any Jews were present, this history was compared with the antient prophecies, to prove that he was the promised Messiah. Our Saviour's discourses were carefully recollected and repeated, as containing the best instructions and motives to a good life.

When these histories of the life of Christ, and his discourses, were committed to writing, every christian church considered itself as in possession of the substance of all the preaching of the apostles and evangelists; and the reading of these writings, called *gospels*, was a recital of the best part of all their sermons.

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When the apostolical epistles were written, and dispersed, they were considered by christians as an additional treasure of the same kind, and, together with the Gospels and the book of Acts, were imagined to contain a complete system of christian faith and duty, that was sufficiently intelligible in those days, when all persons were acquainted with the language in which they were written, and with all those allusions and idioms of speech that puzzle us so much in their writings. A mere recital, or at most a short exposition of these books, therefore, was deemed sufficient for all the purposes of preaching.

Expounding the scriptures seems to have been what the apostle Paul calls *prophecyng*, which, according to his account of it, was calculated for *edification*; and it might have been called prophecy-
ing, because it was an exercise that those who of old were called *prophets* had been accustomed to. We infer from 2 Kings, iv. 13. that it was customary for the people to resort to the prophets on the new
moons

moons, and the sabbath days; probably to hear them read and expound the scriptures, which, otherwise, every person used to do in his own family at the same times. A number of persons agreeing to join in this exercise, and to set apart a place for the purpose, was, probably, the origin of synagogues among the Jews.

The custom of interpreting the scriptures, particularly those of the old testament, soon degenerated into a most extravagant taste for *allegory*. The plainest facts, and most simple moral instructions were supposed to have a reference to the gospel. Nay the whole Jewish history was perverted, and, instead of being considered as a plain narrative of things past, was construed to be a dark prophecy of things future. It is no wonder that with the introduction of this taste preaching began to be more diffuse, but at the same time it was more jejune and trifling. Such were the sermons of Origen.

When heathen philosophers and rhetoricians were converted to christianity, they

they introduced their custom of haranguing on particular subjects, and particular occasions, and carefully premeditated or precomposed their sermons; sometimes prefixing to their discourse, a short text of scripture, not to pass at once from the old method of interpreting the sacred writings, and sometimes omitting it. In this style are the sermons of Chrysostom, consisting of such kind of eloquence as the Greeks and Romans were fond of displaying, in haranguing the populace, and pleading at the bar.

These set discourses were a splendid addition to the service of christian societies, and, I doubt not, were much valued and admired; but it was a sacrificing the genuine simplicity of the gospel and its ordinances, to a taste for the charms of eloquence, and the refinements of a false philosophy; and in most cases, I doubt not, the plain recital of one of our Saviour's parables would have had a much better effect upon the audience. They would have gone away thinking less of the preacher, but more of his subject. So far

far did christian preachers, in those times, depart from the simplicity of the gospel ; and so little were they influenced by the spirit of christianity, that, in imitation of the Grecian orators and philosophers, they even hired persons to clap, and express their applause, with violent gestures and vociferations, at proper intervals, on a signal previously concerted between them and the preacher, or his particular friends. It must be observed, that these set harangues were only occasional, and by no means delivered in every christian church every Lord's day. In the dark ages, few persons being qualified to preach, sermons became scarce ; and at this day, in the church of Rome, the people meet only to hear prayers and celebrate mass. They have no sermons except in Lent, on certain festivals, and on some other particular occasions.

Sermons revived at the reformation, and particularly the custom of explaining the scriptures, and preaching from particular texts of scripture. Indeed, frequent and set discourses were necessary
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for explaining to the common people the grounds and principles of the reformation; and it was particularly favourable to their purpose, to bring the scriptures into view, and recommend the general reading of them.

At the same time, however, a taste for the Greek and Roman literature happening to revive, the generality of christian preachers, like Chrysostom, forming themselves upon the model of the heathen orators and philosophers, this part of the service came to be particularly attended to, especially as the celebration of the Lord's supper was less frequent than before, and consequently the people were chiefly hearers and spectators, and had little to do themselves in the place of worship. Besides, ministers having had a liberal education, being instructed in the art of oratory, and receiving a stipend for ministerial services, the people in general could have had no idea of their being employed in any other manner, so as to appear to deserve their salaries. Hence the composition and delivery

very of sermons came, by degrees, to be considered as the chief business of gospel ministers; and while large salaries were allowed for this work, in many churches, the people left themselves wholly unprovided for purposes of more importance to their edification as christians.

Thus have we been brought into a situation the very reverse, in many respects, of that of the primitive christians; better calculated to display the abilities and address of a public speaker, and to gratify the taste of our hearers, but by no means so well adapted to promote the real improvement of the whole society, as one body.

I am far from denying the utility of preaching, but I would not have it considered as the most essential part of christian worship, or indeed as any essential part of it. Reading the scriptures, praying, and singing of psalms (for which a small stock of knowledge is sufficient) are all that can properly be deemed necessary.

cessary. Otherwise, there could be no public worship without men of learning and ability.

The business of preaching, when properly conducted, is certainly very useful, and would perhaps be more useful, if it was not quite so frequent as it is with the generality of Dissenters, and I wish the true art of it was more studied than it is, and that it was conducted with more propriety; but as it generally is, and probably always will be conducted, many inconveniencies attend our placing it in so high a rank of importance.

As the members of our societies assemble chiefly to hear sermons, if the preacher's discourse or delivery be mean, they are chagrined and disappointed, or perhaps leave the society. On the other hand, if the preacher acquit himself to their satisfaction, they are, in general, only entertained, or affected for the time. They leave the place, expressing their admiration of the ingenuity, learning, or eloquence of the preacher, but the discourse

course has produced no other effect. Their dispositions and conduct, are the same as before.

Another inconvenience attending the very great estimation of sermons respects the preachers. If a minister happen not to have popular talents, he is overlooked and despised, whatever be his real worth, or his abilities in other respects. He is then discouraged, the generous ardour of his mind is damped, and he is often for ever lost to society. On the other hand, the applause which rhetorical talents, and the graces of a good delivery universally meet with, are apt to intoxicate the preacher. From thence it becomes his whole study to rise upon his hearers, and surprise them every time that he exhibits ; till, at last, he is a mere stage player ; his gestures and figures of speech are no longer prompted by his *real feelings*, and the whole service is a piece of artifice, without the exercise of the pure devotion of the heart towards God, and without that simple and earnest desire to instruct and amend
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others, that ought solely to animate the breast of the preacher ; so that whether the preacher acquit himself very ill, or, as is generally esteemed, very well, the consequence is almost equally to be dreaded.

Those discourses, and that manner of address which are really calculated not to procure admiration to the preacher, but which proceed from the heart, and are adapted to make good impressions on the heart, and to engage men to form steady resolutions of good living, will not engage the attention of the *many*. This kind of preaching may be compared to the *still small voice*, which few will listen to, whereas it is something noisy and bold that the populace will generally run after.

It is much to be regretted, that the custom of *expounding the scriptures* is now almost universally laid aside among us, and much to be wished that it might be resumed ; but not in the manner in which it was conducted before, as a part
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of the service introductory to prayer and preaching, but to stand in the place of preaching, all the real uses of which it is generally well calculated to answer. The use that was formerly made of this exposition of the scriptures, was the reason of its being discontinued. The service was long enough without it.

If the custom of expounding the scriptures were once more introduced, it would be a means of making our people better acquainted with them ; and it is notorious they are every day more neglected ; so that it is justly to be feared, that, in a few generations, our posterity will have but a very imperfect and indistinct idea of the contents of those sacred books.

As the books of scripture contain a history of all the dispensations of God to mankind, a great variety of examples both of virtue and vice, and the progress and issue of both, the wise reflections of good men on a variety of occurrences, together with their medita-

tions and prayers ; as they contain all the rules and precepts of a good life, and all the genuine motives to it, delivered with great plainness and native energy, I cannot help thinking, that if they were only understood, they would, of themselves, be able *to make us wise unto salvation* ; and that a very short exposition of them, illustrating those passages that must be really difficult to the unlearned, pointing out the connection of a train of reasoning, showing the force of an argument, the propriety of a precept, &c. &c. would, in general, be more likely to engage such a kind of attention as would make men think themselves, and act upon it afterwards, than the best set declamation upon a particular subject. If men will not hear Moses and the prophets, Christ and the apostles, that is God himself speaking by them, neither will they be persuaded by any other methods that we can apply.

We have no example of a regular discourse, or a set declamation on a particular subject, in the history of our Saviour's

viour's method of teaching. He delivered himself, I doubt not, with great perspicuity, dignity, and energy; but he only discoursed as particular occasions prompted, and, probably, seldom spake for any length of time without interruption, or in a manner that we should now call methodical. The manner of Socrates seems to have been something like it, but not at all that of Plato, or the more pompous and admired of the Greek philosophers and orators.

When the servants of the Jewish rulers, who had been sent to apprehend Jesus, returned, saying, *Never man spake like this man*, it is not to be supposed that their admiration was at all similar to that which would have been excited by what we call a fine, or eloquent speaker; but rather that they were struck with the majesty and authority with which he, at that time more especially, spake; an authority which they had never seen their scribes or pharisees assume, and which no christian preacher ought to assume.

One reason for the peculiar fondness for frequent and long sermons among the old Dissenters, may be looked for in the times of persecution. They had then few opportunities of hearing sermons at all ; so that they could never think they had enough of them when their places of worship were open. For the same reason they seem to have gone to great excess in the frequency and the length of all public exercises of religion, an excess that has had several bad consequences.

SECTION

SECTION VI.

A delineation of a method of church-government.

WHEN what has been advanced under the preceding sections has been considered, I imagine it must appear, that the state of our churches requires to be looked into. We have departed very far indeed from the primitive christian plan, and much farther than any regard to the difference between their circumstances and ours required. We feel the inconveniencies resulting from it, and cannot but wish that they were removed. I shall therefore, as one who has had occasion to think upon the subject, and is willing to contribute what may be in his power to the good of the common cause, propose such a form of church government as I conceive to be the best adapted to remedy the evils we labour under; considering, in the first place, what appears to me the best constitution of a christian

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an church, without any regard to our present customs, habits, and prejudices; and afterwards recommending such forms as may be introduced with more ease, and yet are calculated to answer the principal ends of the stricter discipline.

In order to do this to the most advantage, I shall briefly enumerate the wants both of the christian church in general, and of christian societies in particular; observing that these wants will vary in a course of time, and consequently that the provisions and regulations adapted to them should vary with them. The apostles themselves made alterations in the constitution of the church as new circumstances arose; so that we may conclude they would have continued to do so had they lived longer, and other circumstances arisen. I shall therefore take it for granted, that, in re-constituting a christian church, we are at liberty to make those variations from the plan of the primitive church, which the very great difference between their times and ours shall appear to require. Provided
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we keep in view the original design of a christian church, there will be but little danger of falling into any great impropriety; or if this should be done in theory, a little experience will rectify it. It was only worldly views, and a spirit of faction, that gave rise to the scandalous corruptions I have recited in the primitive discipline.

The situation of things is such, as makes it more than ever necessary, that the christian church should be furnished with *learned men*; by which I do not mean philosophers, mathematicians, or critics, (though the christian scholar should not be destitute of a competent knowledge of any branch of liberal science) but men thoroughly acquainted with the language of the scriptures, and the history of primitive times; with the learning, languages, customs and revolutions of the Jews, and other antient eastern nations, and also those of the Greeks and Romans; more especially with the antiquities of the christian church, and all the remarkable changes that have taken

taken place in the world since the time of Christ, particularly as affecting the state of christianity ; that they may be able accurately to trace, in their causes and effects, the rise and progress of the corruptions of christianity. They should also be well acquainted with the writings and reasonings of the *modern literati*, on moral and metaphysical subjects, and have carefully read and considered all that has been objected to christianity by unbelievers of every class.

It is only men thus furnished, who can read the scriptures with critical skill themselves, or explain them to others ; and this learning, by the very description of it, must have been unnecessary in the primitive times ; since those who were cotemporary with the apostles, could not but know their own language and customs, their own turn of thinking, opinions and prejudices, which we have so much trouble to investigate. Christianity was not then corrupted at all, and the objections of unbelievers were few, and such, as it required no reading or study to answer. To

To acquire this furniture, a liberal and expensive education is absolutely necessary. In these things, mere genius and abilities, without other advantages, will go but a little way. Christians, therefore, if they be wealthy, cannot better consult the honour of their religion, than by making provision for the education of such persons, and putting it in their power, if they be able and faithful men, to attend to those important studies, without distraction.

It would be most desirable, indeed, if men of fortune would themselves apply to those studies, or educate their sons so as to serve the church in this important capacity. But if no person will give so much of his time, talents, and fortune to the public, numbers should join to defray the expences attending the education of such as have ability and inclination for the work.

As it is not particular *christian churches*, but the *christian cause* in general, that requires such men as I have been describing

ing, there is no necessity that they be very numerous; though, certainly, the greater number the christian church can boast, of men who thoroughly understand her principles, constitution, writings, and history, the better.

If we consider the wants of particular christian societies, we cannot but observe, that there should be provision in them all, not only for reading and expounding the scriptures, and singing of psalms, but also for *set discourses*, calculated chiefly to inculcate the great practical maxims of the christian religion upon the minds of the people, in order that they may impress their hearts and influence their lives. These regular discourses, or sermons, may certainly be very useful, and it is very desirable that provision be made for them in every christian society; though I would not have them considered in a light of so high importance, as they have gained at present. However, such is the custom and taste of the age, that mere reading the scriptures, or a short exposition of them,

them, will not now be deemed sufficient for the purpose of christian assemblies; and so far it is certainly right to comply with the established custom and taste, and to avail ourselves of it for good purposes.

Among the generality of the Dissenters, it is also, in a manner, necessary, that some person lead their devotions without the help of a prescribed form of prayer, and that he be able to express himself *extempore*, both on the general subjects of prayer, and also on all the particular occasions that usually occur among them. The whole compass of prayer is not so very large, but that it seems to be very possible, for a person who will properly attend to it, to make himself so much master of it, as to acquit himself with sufficient propriety and fluency in this respect; and whenever *extempore* speaking is practicable, it has so many advantages above a mere *reciting* of any thing, either from notes, or the memory, particularly in point of
justness

justness and strength of emphasis, that it ought, by all means, to be adopted.

But the field for preaching is so very large, that, in general, there seems to be a necessity for the composition and recital of sermons. I cannot consider any man, whatever be his natural or acquired abilities, as qualified to discourse *extempore*, with sufficient variety and fluency, so as not to give disgust to a sensible audience, at least, in a course of time.

For both these purposes, *viz.* preaching, and praying, a person should not only have had a liberal education, in which particular attention should have been paid to the art of composition, but he should have been trained up in the art and habit of public speaking, so as to deliver himself with distinctness and good emphasis, and, in every respect, so as to convey his meaning with precision and energy.

In every thing that has been already
mentioned,

mentioned, some allowance has been made for the difference between the circumstances and established customs of the primitive times and ours ; but nothing has taken place that can make us consider the business of friendly advice, admonition, censure, &c. as before explained, to be less necessary in the christian church. It must continue to be necessary while human nature is the same, and the world we live in, the same too ; so that its snares and temptations are equally alluring, threatening, and dangerous ; because there is the same reason for watchfulness both over ourselves and others.

It is true that vice frequently changes its form. The vices of one age are sometimes extinct in another, and some temptations that have been fatal to virtue, may now no longer exist ; but different vices, no less dangerous in their nature and consequences, arise in their place, attended with temptations peculiar to themselves. We are no longer, for instance, in danger of being seduced
G into

into idolatry, in sacrificing to the heathen Gods, or of apostatizing from the profession of religion by the violence of persecution ; but a time of prosperity may, in reality, be more fatal to our virtue ; as there is nothing to keep up that attention to our duty, and to rouse those powers, that are sure to be awake and vigorous when adversity calls them forth.

Is not the state of our times such, that youth are even more than ever in danger of running into excess ? Is not that rage after what we call pleasure, and that turn for dissipation, which prevails so much at present, a dangerous circumstance for them ? Should not, therefore, the vigilance of their parents, aided by that of their friends, and of the church, be employed to prevent them from being ensnared by bad company, and from contracting bad habits, which might end in their utter ruin and destruction ; being equally fatal to their bodies and their souls, their temporal and eternal interests ?

Is

CHURCH DISCIPLINE. 83

Is not an inordinate love of gain, and an unchristian attachment to the world, the natural consequence of that spirit of trade and commerce which distinguishes the present age? Should not then, a disposition that (unlike the vices of youth) *grows with our growth, and strengthens with our strength*, and even outlives both, be carefully watched? And would not a wise man wish that other persons would pay some attention to him, in this respect, as well as himself?

In the midst of so many new scenes of business and pleasure, that are continually soliciting our attention, are we not in danger of losing that habitual regard to God and his moral government, which is the best guardian of our virtue? When God is, as it were, banished from our thoughts, and we can pass days and weeks without giving any attention to our relation to him, as our creator, preserver, benefactor, and moral governor, we shall certainly be in great danger of losing our reverence for his authority; and the *fear of God not being before our*
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eyes,

eyes, we shall have nothing left to restrain us from abandoning ourselves to any vice or wickedness.

Certainly, then, in this state of things, we have as much occasion as ever for some provision for admonishing us of our duty, and for *establisbing, strengthening, and settling us* in all christian virtues. The truly wise will be thankful for such a provision, and the foolish and profligate certainly stand in most need of it. They must even approve of it, whether, for the present, they would like it or not. But this business of advising, admonishing, &c. is, as I have largely explained before, of a very different nature from that of preaching or praying. It requires very different talents, and a very different situation in the society.

These being the chief wants of a christian church; if I were to give my opinion concerning the best method of providing for the supply of them, it should be as follows.

Let

Let a christian society, who would *re-constitute* themselves upon a plan as near to the primitive one as their circumstances will permit, set out with, and keep in view, this leading idea, that they associate together for the sole purpose of promoting christian knowledge and practice. Let them consider themselves as *citizens of heaven*, travelling through a foreign country, and who mean to give one another all the assistance in their power to quicken their progress, to keep up their attention to their proper country, their home, their dearest connections, and most important interests; that, in the language of the scriptures, they may be assisted in having *their treasure, their hearts, and their conversation in heaven*.

To gain these ends, let all the members of the society meet, and, in the first place, make choice of a person to officiate among them as a *public instructor*. He must be capable of composing sermons, and of leading the devotions of the congregation. If he be skilled in christian literature, as it was explained above,

it will be an advantage to them and himself, but a great degree of eminence in it is not necessary. These objects, however, are very consistent, and if a person have had a liberal education, and give his time to his profession, as a christian minister, it may well be expected that he be sufficiently furnished for all these purposes, so as to be able to serve both his own society, and also the cause of christianity more at large.

Being provided with a minister, corresponding to the office of *bishop* in the primitive times, let the society, in the next place, chuse a number of the more elderly, grave, and serious persons, and withall, if possible, the more wealthy of their own members, to bear the title and office of *elders*, as explained above. Let every person have leave to propose, and let the choice be made by lot or ballot. Let there not be fewer than ten or twenty of these in a society of three or four hundred.

I mentioned *wealth* as a circumstance
which,

which, other things being nearly the same, should be a recommendation to the office of elder, because it will give a man more influence. He will certainly admonish with more freedom and authority, when he runs no risque from the displeasure of the person he admonishes. He will even be less likely to give offence. In every thing relating to society, we must go upon the supposition that we are *men*, as well as christians. Besides, a regard to wealth is well known to have had weight in the choice of elders in primitive times. Indeed, it is sufficiently implied by St. Paul, when he says, that they should be *given to hospitality*.

Let these elders, with the minister at their head (but with no more power than any other of them) form a *consistory*, and meet about once a month (but to be assembled by the minister on any other particular occasion) to consult together concerning the state of the church, and the best method of promoting its real interests; but let them have no power
to

to proceed farther than to an admonition, without the consent of the people at large.

Let it be the business of every elder to admonish all the members of the society that live within his district or neighbourhood, of every irregularity, or tendency to it, with prudence and discretion; taking the opinion of his brethren, or of the minister, in difficult cases; let notorious offenders only, and those who have rejected the repeated admonitions of one or more, be proposed to the whole society for public censure; and when a person incurs the last sentence, excommunication, let him not, however, as in the primitive times, be excluded from the benefit of public worship, but let some other method be taken of letting it be known, that he is no member of the society. For this, and other purposes, let a register be kept of all public proceedings. In very difficult cases, let the minister and elders of one church consult with the minister and elders of other churches, and give one another mutual advice. I

I should think it advisable, that every member of the society should formally give in his name as such, that it be entered in the public register, and that this act be considered by the rest as an admission to communion with them in the celebration of the Lord's supper, and also as a promise on his side, that he will communicate, provided he really believe the rite to be an institution of Christ. But let not this, or any other *opinion* exclude a person from the benefit of the society, if he be a believer in the christian religion, and profess obedience to it, as far as he understands it; and let not any persons, though they be no christians, be at all discouraged from attending any religious exercises of the society, as often as they please.

If it should happen that the minister be absent on a Lord's-day, and no other person, equally qualified, can be conveniently procured to officiate in his place; and if it be thought that the society would suffer by being dispersed, let one or more of the elders supply his place,
by

by reading the scriptures, and distinctly pronouncing prayers and discourses, generally approved.

I would advise, that, the elders and deacons of a church make use of the compositions of others, whenever they do any part of the ministerial duty. It is barely possible that persons who have had no liberal education, should acquit themselves with propriety and decency, either in prayer or preaching, without that assistance. It is very possible, indeed, that, in their attempts at *extempore* prayer, or preaching, they may please themselves, and some of the more ignorant of the people; but that success is very apt to fill them with vanity and self-conceit, for want of that just view of things, and that knowledge of themselves, which it is hardly possible to acquire, without more reading, thinking, and conversing with the world, than generally falls to the share of the private members of christian societies. In this case, it is almost always found, that the ignorant and conceited are the most forward, while the truly

truly modest, and best qualified, are the most backward to show their talents in public ; and many are the mischiefs that I have known this custom to have produced in societies.

There will be a particular propriety in the elders visiting the sick and afflicted, as they will generally be their neighbours, and persons to whom they will be able to unburden their minds, with more freedom than they can to a minister.

As to the necessary *civil offices* of the society, such as making collections, distributing the bread and wine, &c. I imagine that persons of an age inferior to that of elders, will be the most proper to discharge them. Let them, however, be young men of sobriety and good character, bearing the title of *deacons*, and let this office be considered as a rank in the church, preparatory to that of elder.

In general, let no elder be under thirty, or perhaps forty, and no deacon under twenty years of age. Let

Let both the elders and deacons be ordained to their office by the prayers of the congregation; and, if it be convenient, let the ministers of other societies be invited to attend and assist.

Lastly, Let this new formed society imitate the primitive christians, and modern Quakers, in attending to the temporal welfare of the members of the society; particularly in encouraging industry, discountenancing idleness and profligacy, and effectually relieving the industrious and helpless poor. For this purpose let collections be made, as in the primitive times, and among the modern Methodists, much more frequently than is usual among us: for by this means greater sums are raised with less difficulty. If it be thought proper, let an institution of later ages be adopted, and *stewards of the public funds* be appointed, who, in their general rules of distribution, shall be governed by the votes of the people.

Such, my Brethren, is the constitution,
order,

order, and discipline, that I could wish, but despair ever to see established in christian churches. Were I a member of such a church, I should rejoice in its privileges, and I should dread its censures.

If the whole of this scheme of church discipline cannot be adopted, I should think, however, that there could be no great difficulty in establishing a part of it, and so much as could not fail of producing very good effects. To make the business easier, let the proper form of ordaining elders and deacons by prayer, be omitted. Only let the minister, in concert with those persons who have the most influence in any place, fix upon proper persons for discharging the duty of elders ; and when they have agreed to it, let nothing be required of the people but a tacit consent.

That no unnecessary alarm be given, let the only object of discipline be confined to *advice* and *admonition* ; but let the elders make a point of this, that no young people belonging to the society
frequent

frequent bad company, or get bad habits, and grow dissolute and profligate, without some attempt being made to reclaim them ; at least by advertizing their friends of their danger, and engaging those who, on any account, have influence with them, or authority over them, to attend to their conduct, and restrain their excesses. Let the elders, also, see that no master of a family neglect the moral conduct and religious instruction of his children, without serious admonition.

These cases are of infinitely more consequence than any other that can occur in christian societies, and they are cases in which a minister, situated as dissenting ministers generally are, can seldom interfere to advantage ; but in which many other persons might. If but one young person be prevented from becoming abandoned to vice, and lost to society, and but one master of a family be engaged to take proper care of the education of his children, a great and good end will be gained ; and these things might

might often be effected, if any person made it his *business* to attend to them, and took proper measures for the purpose.

When a trial has been made of this looser form of discipline, and the effects of it have been experienced, the society may proceed farther, as they shall judge it to be expedient.



SECTION VII.

Objections to this scheme of church-discipline considered, and some of its advantages more distinctly pointed out.

MANY objections, I doubt not, may be raised against the scheme of church discipline I have proposed; and it is possible there may be more weight in some of them than I am aware of. At present I can only think of three, that deserve particular notice.

1. Many persons will be apprehensive,
that

that such church-officers as I have described will be apt to be conceited and arrogant with respect to the people, and to neglect and despise the minister. But I think that any inconvenience of this kind will be sufficiently obviated by providing against the ostentation of their talents in religious exercises, and by appointing a considerable number of persons in each rank. Many ministers, I am persuaded, would have been less incommoded by twenty ruling elders, than they have sometimes been by a single *clerk*, who is no more than the *precen-tor* in a congregation. Were all source of uneasiness arising from difference of opinion between ministers and people cut off, I should think that nothing of consequence was to be apprehended from the office of elders, as such.

In fact, no inconvenience whatever, arose for many ages from this part of the constitution of the primitive church; but infinite corruptions from the incroachments of the bishops, who, by dispersing their elders and deacons, to preside in dependent

pendent churches, did, in reality, annihilate that order at home, and made them subservient to the extension of their authority abroad: and though the elders rose above their original rank with respect to the people, the bishops rose in the same proportion above them. We may see the progress of episcopal pride and usurpation in the style in which the bishops addressed their presbyters. At first they called them *fratres, brethren*; but in the third century *fili, sons*.

2. In many of our societies it will not be easy to find persons willing to accept of the office of elder, on account of some peculiar sanctity of character, that is supposed to be necessary to support it.

It must be allowed, that the elders in a christian church should be men of the more respectable, exemplary, and unexceptionable characters in the society; but if we attend to the description that the apostle Paul gives of them, in his epistles to Timothy and Titus, I think we need not doubt, but that we may find

a sufficient number in almost any christian society. I shall recite all the particulars for that purpose.

A bishop, or elder, Tit. i. 6. must be *blameless* (*ανεγκλητος*) but this doth not mean *perfect* ; but *free from reproach*, or *scandal* ; one whom no person can justly accuse of any immorality. He must be *the husband of one wife*, because polygamy prevailed more or less in all countries, at that time. He must have *faithful children* ; i. e. his children must be christians, as well as himself, that his whole family might be regular and exemplary ; *not accused of riot, or unruly, not self-willed, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre ; but a lover of hospitality, a lover of good men, sober, just, temperate.* In 1 Tim. iii. 1. the same qualifications of an elder are repeated, with the addition of some characters more, viz. *no striker, or brawler ; that he should rule his own house well, and be no novice, or new convert.*

Now what idea do all these characters

ters give us, but that of a man free from gross vices, and particularly such as would render him exceedingly disagreeable in society, and therefore peculiarly unfit to bear rule in it. It is added, indeed, among other properties, that an elder should be *holy* (οσιος) but considering the rest of the description, we cannot suppose it to mean more than *not profane*; for had it conveyed the idea that is now commonly annexed to the term *holy*, it would have been manifestly superfluous to admonish such a holy person, not to be a brawler, quarrelsome, obstinate, or a drunkard. Strictly speaking, the word that we render *holy*, in the Old Testament (the idea belonging to which has been transferred into the New) means *consecrated, or devoted to God*. In this sense even the garments of the priests, as well as all the priests themselves, whatever was their moral character, as also the tabernacle, the temple, and the whole Jewish nation, are said to be holy. So that, probably, the term holy is applied to an elder, as a person

who devotes himself and his time to the service of God, and his church.

It is also added, in Titus i. 9. That he should *hold fast the faithful word, as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort, and to convince gainsayers*; that is, he must be a firm believer in christianity, and well acquainted with the principles of it. Lastly, it is said, that he should be *no novice*, or new convert; lest he be *lift up with pride*, and that he should have a *good report of them that are without*. Very young, or ignorant persons, would be apt to be conceited with such a rank in the church; and if they were not men of a general good character, the reputation of the society would suffer.

Putting the whole together, I do not see that, in any of our societies, we should be at a loss to pitch upon such men as the apostle had in his eye, when he wrote the descriptions above recited.

It cannot be expected that even the
elders

elders of a christian church on earth should be perfect characters. All that is necessary is such a situation, as will naturally give a man influence in the society, and such a character as will enable him to admonish with propriety and good effect, in those cases in which a person would be in danger of incurring the censure of the church ; and the primitive churches did not take cognisance, except of such vices and follies as were manifestly contrary to some known rule of morality, or precept of the gospel ; and seldom, or never, except in such cases as would have brought scandal upon the christian name. Any man, therefore, who supports what we call *a decent character*, is sufficiently qualified for the office of elder in a christian church. The exercise of his office would continually improve his character, and much good might be done in every society, if all such persons as have been described would exert themselves only so much as they clearly might do, without exposing themselves to the reproach of *Physician heal thyself*.

3. It may, perhaps, be objected, that this scheme of church discipline will confine the attention of the members of particular societies too much to themselves, and alienate their affections from other christian churches, and from mankind in general. To this I answer, that, as far as a closer attention to the interests of any particular society will serve to rouse a generous emulation, to excell the members of other societies, in christian knowledge and practice, the consequence is desirable; and that I should not apprehend that it would, in general, produce any other effect.

The great object that would be continually kept in view, in every society, would be the proper character and views of the members as *christians*, and not as persons living in a particular town, or assembling in a particular place. The preacher who should exhort upon any other principles would not be heard, and the most extensive benevolence could not fail to be every where inculcated; so that, not only would the interests of particular

ticular societies be more attended to, but the neighbourhood, and the world in general would be gainers by these regulations.

Particular christian churches have no interests peculiar to themselves. Every thing they have in view is common to them and all other christians. Besides, we see, in fact, that other societies and combinations of mankind are of great service to one another, when, as in this case, there is no competition of interest among them. Thus philosophical societies, and societies for encouraging agriculture, &c. in different places, having the same object, have, along with a generous emulation, the sincerest friendship for one another; and we see that philosophy and agriculture, &c. are gainers by such associations.

Upon the principle of this objection we might, with more reason, complain of the connections of private families, as tending to interfere with the interests of more extensive relations; whereas it is known

known that the best husbands, fathers, and masters, are always the best subjects, the best citizens, and the best members of society in all respects.

When we consider the many capital advantages of such a scheme of church discipline as I have been describing, I cannot but think that all the objections that can be made to it would soon vanish. For this purpose I shall, in this place, distinctly enumerate the principal of them.

1. The first, and capital advantage of this scheme of church discipline is, that the proper and great ends of a christian society would be effectually answered by it ; the best interests of the members of it would be consulted, and every person would be in the way of receiving instruction, admonition, reproof, or censure, as his circumstances, his character, and conduct should require.

2. In such a constitution of church government, the members of every christian

tian church would look upon themselves as more closely united to one another, by their common relation to the same regular society. Having this bond of union frequently in view, they would become attached to one another, and be in a situation exceedingly favourable to the increase of the genuine principle of brotherly love.

What is it that unites mankind to one another more closely, and makes them more disposed to love and assist one another, than an equal relation to some common society, or fraternity; as their being inhabitants of the same country, living under the same constitution, and form of civil government; being of the same tribe, the same family, and even the same occupation, if their interests do not thereby interfere. In short, the more things we have in common, the more we consider others in the same light with ourselves. Besides, an union in society is an union of interest; it is a strengthening of some common cause, which is a matter of very great consequence when there are many adversaries to it. In

In this regularly constituted church, therefore, christians would have a new and strong bond of union, of brotherly love, and friendship. The members of such a church would consider themselves as one body, closely united together to promote their common salvation, as citizens of heaven. They would mind, *not every man his own things only, but the things of others also.* Every individual in the society, like a limb of the body, would have particular attention paid to him, according to his occasions. They would *exhort one another daily, lest any should be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.* They would consider one another, to provoke to love, and to good works. They would *not suffer sin in their brethren,* but would continually study the things, whereby one might edify another. The adversaries of any one member of such a society as this would, for the same reason, be the adversaries of all, and all would join to repel the common danger.

2. Had the form of church government that was in use among the primitive

tive christians been strictly adhered to, almost every corruption of christianity would have been prevented, especially those that were occasioned by the incroachments of the ecclesiastical upon the civil powers. A scheme of this kind is so far from being favourable to the ambition of priests, that wherever it is established, that excessive and superstitious regard that is paid to the character and office of a minister, when he alone engrosses all the power of a church, and is the only conspicuous person in it, cannot subsist. The power of the society being divided among a number of persons, the whole body would be more respectable, but any individual would, certainly, be less so. In a society thus constituted, the great object of attention and respect would be *the consistory of elders*. The minister would only rank as one of them, with that additional reverence, which his learning, abilities, and talents as a speaker would command; and since the respect that was paid him would depend solely on these qualifications, he would be the more solicitous to improve them. Far

Far better, however, were it for any society, that the power of church discipline be lodged in the hands of the minister, and he be the only object of reverence, than that there should be no such power in any hands at all. The former of these situations may be said to approach to *tyranny*, or despotism; but the latter tends to *anarchy*, and dissolution.

3. I cannot help thinking but that, if protestant churches had all been formed upon this plan, or as near to it as the prejudices of christians would have admitted, it would have been favourable to the progress of christian knowledge; and that the remaining corruptions of christian doctrine would have been reformed with more ease, and less disturbance in christian societies; at least, in a manner less hurtful to the interests of vital and practical religion. When every circumstance is taken into consideration, I am of opinion, that dissenting ministers, instead of contriving to abolish the forms of church discipline, when they found

found themselves incommoded by them, would have acted more wisely, if they had endeavoured to make them subservient to their purpose ; at least, that, if the ministers had, in some places, been the sufferers, the cause of truth would, in general, have been a gainer by this plan. To enable us to judge of this, I shall briefly describe what generally happens with us in these cases.

It happens almost universally, that the minister, being the person who reads and thinks the most in the society, has his mind first enlightened. He begins to call in question the truth of those opinions in which he has been educated, and which he has hitherto preached ; and in the progress of his enquiries, his suspicions are confirmed. If he be a man of integrity, he will always preach at least consistently with his real sentiments, which are now considerably different from those of his hearers ; and while so much of the business of the society is in his hands, so that himself, his performances, and opinions are almost continually

tinually in their view, it is impossible but that, notwithstanding all his care, the change in his sentiments will be perceived. If he be a young man, and zealous for the propagation of new discovered truth, he will be apt, of his own accord, and sometimes unseasonably, to obtrude his favourite opinions on his hearers; perhaps even preach on those subjects; and in other respects he will not always take the most prudent methods of propagating truth.

The usual consequence of this is, that the congregation, and especially the elder part of them, whose prejudices are most riveted, take the alarm; while some, at least of the younger part of the society, adhere to the minister, and adopt his sentiments. Disputes unavoidably arise, and in the heat of debate, the importance of the opinion contended for is greatly magnified. Be the thing ever so trifling in itself, the whole of religion will soon be made to depend upon it, by those who adhere to the old opinions, while the abettors of the new will plead for moderation. In

In this case, if the society be large enough to bear it, they often divide into two; or the minister, though every way qualified for the discharge of his duty, if he be not absolutely dismissed, finds himself at length under a necessity of relinquishing his office, and often without any resource for a maintenance. If he stand the opposition, great numbers withdraw themselves, and their subscriptions, and he is often, on many other accounts, rendered miserable for life; not unfrequently is his life manifestly shortened by the state of anxiety and distress in which he is involved; while many of the people are greatly dissatisfied, and more strongly attached to their old opinions than before.

Too often the minister thus circumstanced, not having the choice of a catechism, neglects the catechizing of children, and the instruction of youth altogether; and for the same reason omits other parts of his duty, in which his sentiments would be more particularly conspicuous, to the great detriment of practical

practical religion. This situation of things has been peculiarly unfavourable to church discipline, as was explained above. Few, indeed, are the cases, in which, through the prudence of the minister, and a happy concurrence of other circumstances, a congregation of Dissenters gets over this *great crisis*, without any diminution of their strength, or any injury to the interests of real virtue.

On the other hand, in a society governed by elders, single persons, or their opinions, ^{do not} make so great a figure, or occasion so great alarm. They are not of so much importance in the society. And in the primitive church, the business of preaching was so inconsiderable, that, provided the usual portion of the scriptures was read in the society, they might be the better content to prefer that interpretation which they liked best.

In this manner, truth might be propagated more silently ; and if once the elders, or the majority of them, were convinced,

convinced, there would be less difficulty in bringing over the rest ; and the society being very firmly bound together by the forms of church-government, few would think of quitting it ; and therefore they would endeavour to make their situation in it as easy as they could.

Among the Quakers, who have no ministers so conspicuous as ours, but who are governed, as it were, intirely by elders ; differences of opinion occasion no disagreeable altercations, or schisms ; and there have been, and are, considerable differences of opinion among them.

Lastly, To sum up what I have advanced, concerning the advantages resulting from the form of church government I have been recommending. Such a christian church as this would be an interesting object of attention to all the members of it. It would be a society in which every man would have a certain place and rank, a certain estimation and character, and a certain employment. He would constantly feel himself

I subject

subject to the friendly inspection of others, and he would, in his turn, habitually attend to them.

Every officer would vye with the rest in diligence, in prudence, and in the faithful discharge of his duty ; and no person, or thing, would be overlooked, or neglected, because it would be some person's known duty to attend to them.

To adopt a description which some think, but which I do not think, to have been originally intended for it ; such a christian church would be *fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners*. None but the openly abandoned and profligate, and those who would soon be considered by the world as such, would cut themselves off from such a church ; and the privileges of it would be courted by all serious and thinking persons, who valued their real improvement, and who had any idea of the superiority of things unseen and eternal to those of time and sense.

Should

Should any society of rational christians, despising the insignificant censures of the world, form themselves upon this model, having no other object than the genuine simplicity of christian doctrine, and the native purity of christian manners, they would do themselves immortal honour. Should their example be generally followed, they might be said, in a manner, to re-christianize the world.



SECTION VIII.

Additional considerations in favour of church-discipline, as motives to the establishment of it.

ALL that has been advanced on the subject of church discipline in this address, may be considered as *motives* to the establishment of it in christian societies ; but there are some considerations peculiarly adapted to this purpose, and which could not have been introduced with advantage in any of the preceding

ceding sections. I have, therefore, reserved them for the conclusion of the address.

If we consider what provision is made for the improvement of men's minds in other respects, and, more especially, in what manner good dispositions are formed, and mankind are actually trained to virtue, we shall find, that, in all cases, the chief instrument is *discipline*, or something equivalent to it. In what manner is it that any art, liberal or mechanical, is acquired? It is seldom, or never, by instruction only, but chiefly by the attention of those who are skilled in it to the trials and exercises of those who are to be instructed. It is well known that without some superintendence of this kind, bad habits will inevitably be formed, and the scholars will make no true proficiency in any thing. Even science, where practice is not concerned, is never taught to any purpose, without frequent and careful examinations, in which actual proofs are given that the principles of it are understood,
and

and that progress is ready made in the attainment of it.

In what manner is it that children are taught good behaviour, moral or civil, but by what is properly called discipline; that is by the authority of a parent, constantly attentive to them, and admonishing, reproofing, correcting, or commending them, as there may be occasion?

By what means is it that mankind are taught regularity of behaviour, as good citizens, but by a much more rigorous discipline? Not only are laws promulgated, but a variety of officers are appointed, to take cognizance of offences; and in every state there are honours and emoluments of various kinds, that may be attained by those who have ability and skill to conduct the affairs of the community.

Let us consider, moreover, in what manner the divine being has made provision for the good conduct of his children,

dren, and subjects of mankind in general. Is it not by placing them in a state of moral discipline, and so constituting them and the world, that they cannot but feel the inconvenience of vicious habits and conduct, and find themselves easy and happy in a course of virtue? The hand by which they are thus trained and disciplined is invisible, but the effects of it are visible enough; it being evident to every observer, that mankind are taught wisdom and virtue by their feelings and experience more than by instruction. It is by the admonitions and reproofs of their consciences, by the censures of the world, and their general condition in it.

In all the voluntary combinations of mankind, that deserve the name of *societies*, or even of *clubs*, there are rules and orders, officers and penalties, or the ends of the society could not be answered, and the community would be dissolved.

Can it be supposed then, that, contrary

trary to what we are taught by nature, experience, the conduct of divine providence, and the custom of mankind in all similar cases, that a christian society can flourish, and the great ends of it be secured, without a similar provision? Is the object and end of these associations of less moment, or to be compassed with less attention? In both respects the very reverse is the case. In christian societies the most important instruction is to be communicated, the most excellent maxims of conduct are to be inculcated, and the best habits are to be formed. It is the object of these societies to counteract the strongest influences to which men are exposed through life, namely, temptations to vice and excess from every quarter, and, in the midst of a thousand difficulties and discouragements, to train them up to virtue and immortality.

To gain these great ends, ought we not, if we be wise, to adopt such rules, and such systems, as we see universally adopted in all similar cases, and without which similar ends have never been gained.

ed. Our christian societies, therefore, should be regularly constituted ; there should be a subordination of one to another ; there should be the governors and the governed, the masters and the scholars, the fathers and the children ; and there should be authority, not *nominal* only, which is all that dissenting ministers are now possessed of, but *real*, as it might be in the hands of persons more independent of the people. There can be the less difficulty in this, when every thing that is called authority in this case is of the most gentle and salutary nature, consisting of nothing but instruction, friendly admonition, faithful reproof, or just censure ; and when all that any man has to fear, is to lose his rank and name in the society.

I would add another argument and motive for the regular constitution and just discipline of christian churches, from the authority of the scriptures ; i. e. of Christ and his apostles. It is plain that our Lord, when he gave such particular instructions how to behave with a refractory offender, in what manner to admonish

admonish and reprove him, in what case his conduct should be reported to the church, and when he should be expelled from it, and considered as *an heathen man and a publican*, took it for granted, that his disciples *would* form themselves into such societies, and that those powers of admonition, censure, and excommunication would be assumed and exercised. We may, therefore, conclude with certainty, that the great lawgiver and judge of christians really meant, that such churches, with such provisions and powers, should be erected; and we ought to consider this as a sufficient authority, and even as equivalent to an express injunction, to form them.

At the first planting of christianity, we find that the apostles actually did introduce this order and discipline wherever they established a christian church. We have in their writings a clear description of the powers of the officers they appointed in it, and of the nature and conduct of their discipline; and their history affords examples of the exercise and use of it.

It

It seems, from some passages in St. Paul's epistles, and is, indeed, probable from the nature of the thing, that while some of the elders of the primitive churches applied themselves chiefly to the business of teaching, others attended to matters of discipline, having a particular talent for it. *Having then, says he, Rom. xii. 6, &c. gifts differing, according to the grace that is given to us; whether prophecy, let us prophecy according to the proportion of faith; or ministry, let us wait on our ministering. He that teacheth, on teaching; or he that exhorteth, on exhortation. He that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; HE THAT RULETH WITH DILIGENCE.* He also mentions governments, i. e. probably, the talent of conducting church discipline, among the different powers communicated to the members of the christian church, 1 Cor. xii. 17, &c. *Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular. And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healing, helps, GOVERNMENTS, diversities of tongues.* Now

Now, though it be acknowledged, that the *particular form* of church discipline may vary according to circumstances, yet it cannot follow that, in any circumstances, it should entirely cease. There ought, therefore, certainly to be shepherds *to feed the flock of God*, till Christ the *chief shepherd* shall personally appear; and those only can be considered as shepherds, who are in circumstances in which they can assume the power of shepherds, and act as such; which cannot in reason be expected of those who are called *ministers* among the dissenters.

We find no time in ecclesiastical history in which christian churches were not regularly constituted, having, in each of them, a number of *elders*, whose business it more especially was to advise and admonish the rest of the society, and in which a person was not liable to be excommunicated for scandalous immorality. We can trace the *corruptions* of this discipline, but the *institution* of it must be referred to the times of the apostles. The earliest and universal custom of the church
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is a sufficient proof of this; and it should seem that the sentiments and practices of the apostles, by whatever medium of proof they be ascertained, should be the rule by which we are to form our own. The scriptures themselves are of no other authority with us, than as they supply the best arguments of what was taught, established, or enjoined, by men who were inspired of God, and therefore not liable to be mistaken.

Thirdly, to excite us to more attention to this business of church government and discipline, let us consider the good effects of it where it is, in some measure, practised. In former times, christians of other denominations might have learned the mode and effect of discipline from us, but now it is to be looked for any where but among us; and let us not think ourselves disgraced by the imitation of any sect of christians, in a thing that is really useful, how despicable soever their principles or conduct may appear to us in other respects.

The

The Presbyterians in Scotland are very attentive to matters of discipline, and have several ecclesiastical courts, subordinate to one another, for that purpose. The *ruling elders* assist the minister in overseeing and correcting the manners of the people, attend upon them in visiting and catechising their districts in the parishes, in praying with the sick, in private admonitions, and at the communion table. In all matters of government and discipline they have an equal vote with the ministers. *History of Religion.* Vol. 4, p. 98.

Before every communion, the minister visits and examines every family in his parish once, at least, of which notice is given the preceding Lord's-day, that every district may know when he intends to visit them. The minister, on his visit, marks, and enters the children in his examination book, if they be fit age. He then exhorts every one to a strict observance of their respective duties, and particularly to family prayer, reading the scriptures, and singing of psalms.

At

At parting, the minister usually prays with every family. Visitation being over, the minister gives notice when he will examine the persons marked in his book. Every district comes to church by themselves, at the time appointed, and the minister, accompanied by the elder and deacon of that district, examines them in the order in which they stand in his book. He marks at every person's name how they answer. Grown persons, who have been often examined, are not catechised, when they are found to be sufficiently knowing. *Ib.* 101.

Nothing is deemed scandalous, or subject to church censures, but what is accounted so by the word of God, or by some act, or universal custom of the church of Scotland, agreeable thereto. *Ib.* 104. In case of drunkenness, disobedience to parents, sabbath-breaking, swearing, cursing, scolding, fighting, lying, cheating, or stealing, the persons guilty are ordinarily admonished in private only for the first offence; for the second offence they are rebuked by

by the kirk session, and on promise of amendment, there they are to stop. If no amendment follows, the kirk session proceeds to the sentence of *lesser excommunication*, under which the person is to lie till the amendment appears. If the guilty person neglects to take the sentence off, and relapses into the vices for which he is censured, it may be construed into such a degree of contumacy as may merit the greater excommunication, or the absolute cutting off from christian communion, a sentence to be passed in a higher court. *Ib.* 107. All the dissenting congregations in the northern counties of England, and generally in Wales, are constituted in the same manner as the churches of Scotland; with this advantage, arising from their situation, that their regulations are purely ecclesiastical; no church pretending to a right of interference with another; and no aid of civil power being used, or wanted.

It is, in a manner, by the force of discipline alone, that the Quakers exceed
almost

almost all other sects of christians in an uniform decency and regularity of behaviour. One of the principal uses of their *monthly meetings*, as described by George Fox, was, that the poor might be better taken care of, the younger sort instructed, and informed in the way of God, and the loose and disorderly re-proved, and admonished in the fear of the Lord. *Ib.* 247.

The power and authority exercised at those meetings, says Mr. Penn, is such as Christ has given to his own people to the end of the world, in the persons of his disciples; viz. to oversee, exhort, reprove, and, after long suffering, and waiting upon the disobedient and refractory, to disown them as any more of their communion, or that they will any longer stand charged, in the sight and judgment of God or men, with their conversation or behaviour, until they repent. *Ib.* 250.

The crimes and irregularities which render the Quakers liable either to be admonished,

admonished, or disowned as brethren, are a neglect of the meetings appointed for the worship of God, injustice and frauds of all kinds, defamation, breach of the marriage covenant, whoredom, drunkenness, gaming, and swearing. They also strictly admonish against the unnecessary frequenting of ale-houses or taverns, the abuse of time in diversions, as cock-fighting, horse-racing, play-houses, &c. extravagance in dress, and also in trade; one brother going to law with another, and other things peculiar to them as Quakers. *Ib.* 254. In all these cases, advice and admonition is given with the greatest tenderness and prudence, and in due gradation. If the offender, after all, prove refractory, and they be obliged to disown him, they record the same, as a testimony of their care for the honour of the truth they profess. *Ib.* 251.

Among the Methodists of Mr. Wesley's denomination, there are what they call *United Societies*, instituted, as he says, *to watch over one another in love.* For this

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purpose

purpose each society is divided into *classes*, according to their places of abode. There are about twelve persons in every class, one of whom is stiled the leader. It is his business to see each person in his class once a week, at the least ; to advise, reprove, comfort, or exhort, as occasion may require ; and to inform the minister of any that are sick, or of any that walk disorderly, and will not be reprov'd. *Ib.* 323. After the enumeration of a great number of duties, Mr. Wesley concludes with saying, " If there be any among
" us who observe them not, who habitually break any one of them, let it be
" made known unto them that watch
" over that soul, as they that must give
" an account. We will admonish him
" of the error of his ways, we will bear
" with him for a season ; but then, if
" he repent not, he hath no more place
" among us. We have delivered our
" own souls." *Ib.* 325.

The Herrn-hutters, or Moravians, soon established among themselves a sort of discipline, which closely unites them to
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one another, divides them into different classes, puts them under an intire dependance on their superiors, and confines them to certain exercises of devotion. The difference of age, sex, and the situation their members are in with respect to matrimony, constitute those different classes. Each has its director, chosen by its members. Every member is daily visited by one of his class, who gives him exhortation, and makes a report of his conduct to the elders. Frequent particular assemblies are held in each class, and general ones by the whole society. The overseers, or leaders, have also their private meetings, to instruct one another in matters concerning the guidance of souls; and they pay uncommon attention to the instruction of youth. Besides those who have the care of orphans, there are others that are intrusted with that of all the other children. *Ib.* 340.

That these three last mentioned sects of christians do at all hold together, and that the practical purposes of christia-

nity are at all answered in them, appears to me to be owing to nothing but their regular forms of discipline. Were they reduced to the same condition with us, and to have no provision except for public instruction, they would, I doubt not, decay, and be extinct in a very short time.

That we, who are called *rational dissenters*, hold together, in our present loose and undisciplined state, is owing, in part, to our having been a body of considerable standing, which gives us some of the advantages of an establishment, and in some measure to the connections the dissenting families have with one another; connections which many persons do not chuse to break by leaving us. But this is a tye that has less force every day, as indifference to the dissenting interest becomes more general, and desertions from it become more frequent, and consequently less noticed.

Not a few, I hope, adhere to us from *principle*, but less care is continually taken to instruct our youth in the true principles

ples of our dissent; and since the subject seldom comes in view, in peaceable and quiet times; numbers of the more polite part of our young gentlemen see no difference between the service of the church of England and that of the Dissenters, except such as, to outward appearance, is in favour of the former; and seeing it to be, withall, a more fashionable, splendid, and less expensive mode of religion; it is no wonder that many of them, who think and reflect very little, secretly incline to it, and are ready to take any favourable opportunity of going over to it; especially as it may be done without any censure, and almost without notice.

With us a great deal too much depends upon the merit and abilities, or rather the popular talents only, of our ministers. In these circumstances, it is very little that can be gained, but a great deal that may be lost; and I believe it is fact, that for one person who is brought over to us by the reputation of any good preacher among us, there are ten that leave us through a disgust with our bad ones. If
the

the very best preachers among us, and those who have the most popular talents (which are very rare among mankind) barely keep up the numbers of their congregations, for a considerable time, they can boast what very few can do; and many societies might be named which are dwindling to nothing, under preachers whose compositions are excellent, and whose delivery is much above mediocrity. The temporary increase of particular societies in London is only at the expence of others; and this shifting from place to place makes it the more easy for them to shift into the church, or *infidelity* at last.

It is certainly much to be regretted, that; with so many solid advantages as the rational dissenters, at least, think themselves possessed of, with respect to the purity of christian faith, and their freedom from the superstition and enthusiasm that disgrace so many other sects of religion, they should be destitute of the common requisite for the growth, and even the continuance of any sect or society whatever. But it is no uncommon thing

thing for persons who are possessed of superior knowledge to want what is called common sense.

The dissenting interest (besides its being favourable to civil and religious liberty) can only be truly valuable as the cause of truth and virtue, or as far as it is subservient to the genuine purity of christian doctrine and discipline. With respect to the former, I, as one of the denomination, cannot but think we have great advantages ; but with respect to the latter, I, though one of them, am sensible that we are greatly deficient ; and as a friend to the cause of truth and liberty, I most earnestly wish that something may be thought of, and done, towards supplying the defect.

I am afraid that the circumstances of things among us are not favourable to the introduction of the discipline I have been recommending. Indeed, it is almost universally easier to establish a new society, than reform an old one, especially one of a long standing. I have not the least doubt, however, but that a true christian church will at length appear,
free

free from all corruptions in doctrine or discipline, when its doctrines will be pure, and its discipline equally free from rigour on the one hand, and remissness on the other. I hope that this happy period is advancing apace; and whether any of the forms of christian churches now subsisting will serve for a *basis* of such a church, or not, is of small consequence. Let the cause of truth, of virtue, and of Christ prevail, whoever be the instruments of it.

In the mean time, let the serious members of all christian churches attend to the reformation of them, and attempt every thing that shall appear practicable; and if no external reformation be advisable, let them, however, make the best they can of their situation. If it would be in vain to attempt the revival of the forms of church discipline with us, or, if this be judged inexpedient, let us however, revive the spirit of them. Let every member of our societies consider it as his duty to promote the proper ends of them, and let his ability and opportunity

tunity be considered by him as the measure of his obligation to exert himself. Let us all, without distinction, *watch over one another* with a friendly concern, to check every thing that is bad, and promote every thing that is good in one another. Let ministers imbibe from the spirit of their religion, and of their office, that intrepidity and independence of mind, which a regard to their situation in other respects would not give them. Let them, in the language of St. Paul to Timothy, *give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine*. If they cannot both *command*, and *teach*, let them, however, *be examples to believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity; that, taking heed to themselves, and to their doctrine, they may both save themselves, and them that hear them.*

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Essay.—p. 26. l. 1. for *censurers* read *censures*.—p. 29. line 1. for *abuse* read *abuses*.—p. 61. l. 8. for *of origin* read *origin of*.—p. 112. l. 14. read *do not make*.—p. 117. l. 1. for *ready* read *really*.—p. 125. l. 5. from the bottom, read *of fit age*.

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